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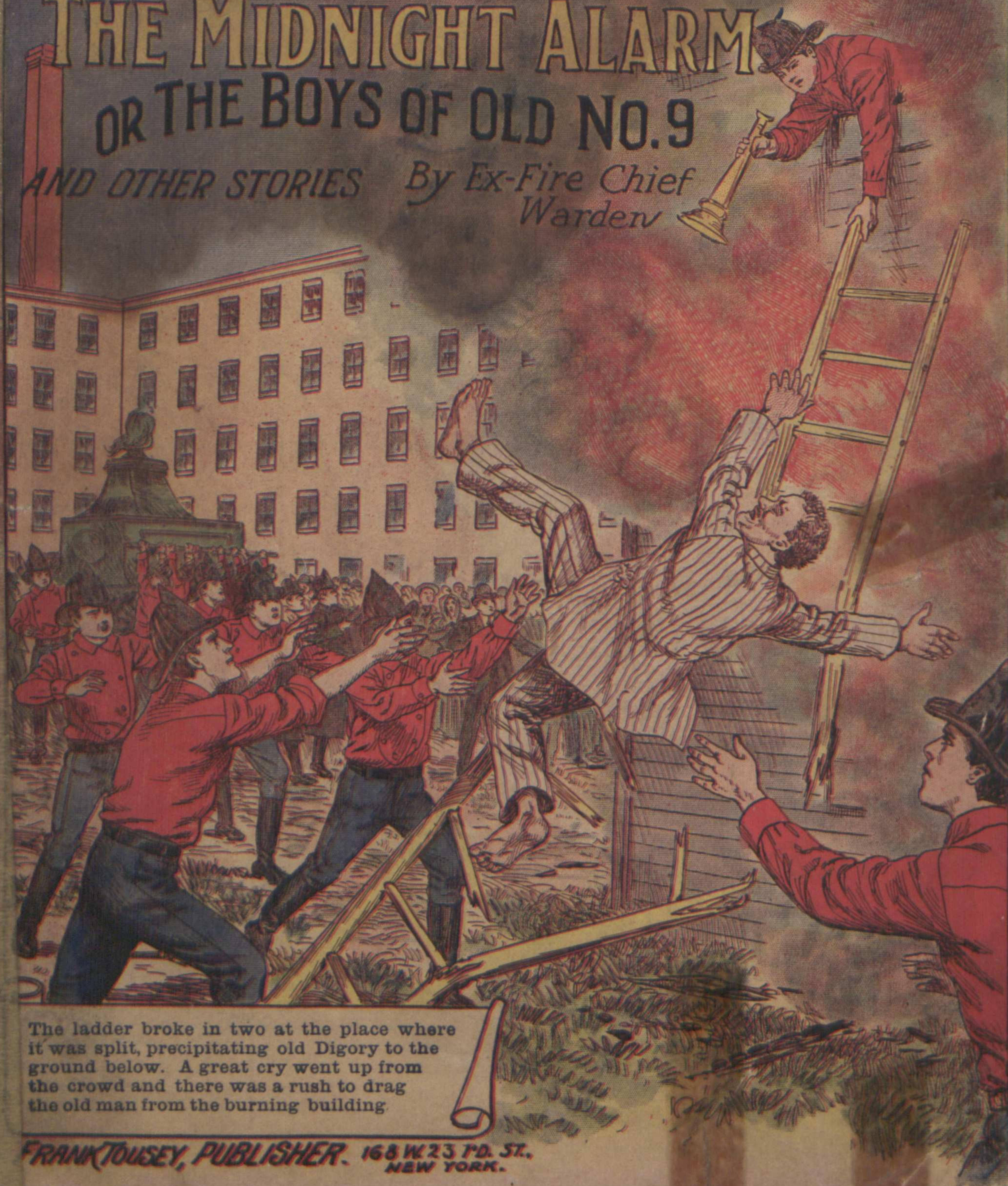
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PLUCK AND LUCK

THE MIDNIGHT ALARM OR THE BOYS OF OLD NO. 9

AND OTHER STORIES

By Ex-Fire Chief
Warden



The ladder broke in two at the place where it was split, precipitating old Digory to the ground below. A great cry went up from the crowd and there was a rush to drag the old man from the burning building.

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PLUCK AND LUCK

Stories of Adventure

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THE MIDNIGHT ALARM

OR,

THE BOYS OF OLD No. 9

By EX-FIRE CHIEF WARDEN

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE IN THE ENGINE HOUSE

"Hands off, Martin Leake! You don't do that while I'm around!"

Oscar Everding seized the young fellow, slung him around, and threw him violently against the wall.

"Oh, Oscar, don't hurt him! Don't get yourself into trouble for my sake!" Cassie Sherman cried.

A moment before she had screamed for help.

The electric light at the head of the stairs had gone out, and Martin, meeting Cassie as she was passing into the cloak room, threw his arms about the pretty girl and tried to kiss her.

It was a bold piece of impudence, for Martin might have known that somebody was around, but then Martin Leake was a bold and impudent fellow, and could safely be relied upon to do any mean, dirty thing in this line, and yet, at the same time, he was such a hypocrite, and played the respectable man so well when it suited him, that his many acquaintances in Longford, where he was the captain of the local fire company, known far and wide as "No. 9," believed him to be a fairly good young man.

"Blast you, Oscar Everding! What do you mean?" flashed Martin, blustering up to the quiet, self-possessed boy of eighteen, who had certainly read him a lesson which he well deserved. "How dare you lay hands on me, you impudent beggar! I'll have you bounced!"

"All right," said Oscar.

"I'll have you thrown out of the fire company!"

"All right," said Oscar, just as quietly as he had spoken before.

"You'll see whether it's all right or not!" stormed Martin. "I've a good mind to push your face in, right now."

"Push away!" said Oscar, putting his hands behind his back. "Captain Leake, I've done to you just what I would do to any fellow who offers an insult to an innocent girl. Make the most of it! Go ahead and do your worst!"

Cassie was crying then.

A number of other girls, employees in Rainsford & Ramy's big department store, had come crowding into the cloak room now.

"Just like his impudence!" cried one.

"Martin Leake is always bothering us girls!" exclaimed another.

"Give it to him, Oscar! Give him what he deserves!" several others cried.

It was a good time for disappearing, and Martin sneaked.

He was Mr. Rainsford's nephew, and if there was one thing above another that his uncle was particular about, it was that the male employees should not make love to the salesladies.

Oscar knew very well that Martin would never bring the matter to his uncle's notice, and he said so to Cassie as he walked home with her, something, by the way, which he very seldom did.

Cassie lived with her widowed mother in a small two-story frame dwelling, close up against the Longford Woolen Mills, which house was owned by a queer, miserly old fellow named Diggory Doodles, who occupied a room on the top floor.

Leaving the girl at the door, Oscar hurried home to supper.

He was anxious to make as good time as possible, for there was to be an unofficial meeting of the boys of No. 9 at the engine house that evening, and Oscar intended to be present.

He waited only to wash up, and then sat down at the supper table with his widowed mother's keen eye upon him.

Mrs. Everding could read her boy's face like an open book, and she knew at a glance that there was something wrong.

"Why, it's nothing, mother," said Oscar, in answer to her solicitous inquiry. "Only a little more trouble with Martin Leake."

"Seems to me that there is always trouble with Martin," sighed the widow.

"So there has been, ever since I was promoted, mother. You see, I am head stock clerk, now, and Martin is very jealous of me. But this is an entirely different affair from the other rows we have had," and after he had said this, Oscar went on to tell just what had occurred.

"I was afraid it would come to this," said Mrs. Everding. "Martin Leake is a thoroughly bad fellow, if all I hear said of him is true, and a young man that any good girl would do well to shun, but he can do you a great deal of injury, my son, and I fear for you. This may cost you your place. Oh, Oscar, I wish you would resign from the fire company. I can't bear to think of you being so closely associated with that young man."

"What! Resign from No. 9! Oh, no, no!" cried Oscar.

"That's one of the things impossible, mother dear. Trust me! I'm no longer a little boy. I'm getting to be a man, and I should be ashamed to think that I couldn't hold my own against such a mean, sneaking fellow as Martin Leake any day in the week."

"Yes, but if you lose your position through him, how are you going to live?" sighed the widow, "that's what is worrying me, my boy."

Oscar quieted his mother's fears with soothing words, and soon after departed for the engine house, which was located on Pleasant street, near Main.

Most of the boys had already gathered there and were sitting around chatting about the fire company's affairs.

"Hello, Oscar! Began to think you were not coming, old man!" cried Pete Dayton, Oscar's particular chum.

"I am a little late," replied Oscar. "I was delayed a bit on my way home."

"Yes, I heard about it," replied Pete. "Had a scrap with the captain, didn't you?"

"Not exactly a scrap. We had trouble, for which I am sorry, but it couldn't be helped."

"Over Cassie Sherman, wasn't it?" asked Joe Titus. "Martin will have it in for you. He's dead stuck on the girl."

"The captain is dead stuck on all the pretty girls in Longford, as far as I know," laughed Sam Pendergast, "but drop it, fellows. Question is, what about this rumor? Is it true or not that there is going to be a new fire company organized in Longford? If so, where do we stand? Is there any one of our crowd mean enough to desert old No. 9?"

This was the object of the gathering.

For some days past the rumor had been flying about town. It was said that people were getting tired of having their property guarded against fire by a parcel of boys, and it was indeed a fact that No. 9 was getting to be rather an old engine, and was originally second hand, and bore her number when purchased—hence the name of the company—and that Longford was now rich enough to support a fire company which was entirely up to date.

Moreover, the boys of old No. 9 were mostly working fellows, many of them being employed in the Longford Woolen Mills. There had been a disposition, it was claimed, to exclude the sons of the richer element, of which there were a good many in town, for Longford was one of the most thriving places just outside of Cleveland, Ohio, and the residence of not a few commuters, who went to business in the city every day.

"I guess the rumor is true, all right," said Bill Jones. "It came to me pretty straight."

"I was told, on good authority, that Martin Leake is at the bottom of the whole business," said Pete Dayton. "I suppose it's high treason to talk against the captain, but—hold up! Here he is, now!"

The door of the fire house opened, and Martin hastily entered. His face was red and flushed, and he had evidently been drinking, a habit which seemed to have been growing upon him of late.

"Good evening, boys!" he called out. "Well, how are you getting on with it? I suppose you are discussing this absurd rumor that I am trying to organize a new fire company to knock out old No. 9?"

"That's what we are," said Pete, suddenly. "We were talking about just that very thing."

"Well, of course you know it's all blame nonsense," said Martin, seating himself in the midst of the group. "There isn't one word of truth in it, so far as I'm concerned. As for the rest of the rumor I don't believe it anyhow, and when they come to say that I am in it, why it's a downright lie."

"That's what it is!" said Oscar, meaningly.

"That's what what is?" flashed Martin

"What you are saying."

"Do you mean to insinuate——"

"I don't insinuate anything," persisted Oscar. "I only speak of what I know."

"That's soon told," laughed the captain, offensively.

"Possibly. There is one thing that I do know that I was just going to mention, however, and that is that you wrote to the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company of Manchester, New Hampshire, inquiring the price of a new steam fire engine last week."

There was a big sensation at once.

"It's a lie!" shouted Martin, springing to his feet.

"It's the truth, and I can prove it," said Oscar, calmly, "and if you say anything to the contrary, why then you lie, Martin Leake. There, boys! That's what I promised to tell you to-night!"

"Do you dare to call me a liar! Do you dare——" yelled the captain, making a rush at Oscar.

Certainly our hero cannot be blamed for it.

Martin had been drinking and was ugly. Blinded with rage, he struck at Oscar, got one between the eyes himself, and went tumbling over backward upon the floor.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN THE CLOCK STRUCK TWELVE.

"A fight! A fight!" cried a dozen voices, as the boys of No. 9 sprang to their feet.

"Not a fight! Only an act of self defence!" cried Oscar in a clear, ringing voice. "He has a knife in his hand, boys! Look!"

Martin Leake was just trying to pick himself up, something which he seemed to find it rather difficult to do, for he was half stunned, and pretty well dazed.

The knife was in his hand, fast enough, and the blood was trickling down upon Oscar's cuff.

"Coward!" cried Pete Dayton.

"Fire him out!" echoed Joe Titus.

"No, no! He's the captain, let him explain!" cried several voices, for Martin Leake was not without friends among the company.

But the captain of No. 9 was in no condition to explain, or do anything sensible just then.

Maddened with rage and drink, once he was on his feet, he made a wild dash at Oscar with a wicked-looking knife, raised ready to strike.

Oscar anticipated what was coming, and was all ready for him.

With one quick movement of his hand he struck Martin's wrist a terrible blow which sent the knife ringing to the floor, and, all in the same instant, throwing his arms about the fellow, lifted him clear off his feet, dragged him to the door which Pete Dayton, anticipating his desire, flung wide open, and threw the captain from him down the steps.

Martin went sprawling on the sidewalk.

He had met his match, and was thoroughly frightened now. Scrambling up, he sneaked off without a word.

"Phew! You are in for it, now, Oscar!" exclaimed Joe Titus, who, with the other boys, had crowded to the door. "That's mutiny for fair!"

"Let it be mutiny, then," said Oscar. "If we members have got to stand still and let the captain stab us, I'm not in it. To be sure, he only gave me a scratch, but it isn't his fault that it's not worse."

"It will cost you your place, I'm afraid," said Pete.

"Let it. Never mind me, boys. My affairs don't interest you. Now, then, come inside and look at my proof. Here is a letter

from my cousin, who works in the office of the Amoskeag Company, at Manchester. That will tell the story, and prove to you that I am right."

It was exactly as Oscar stated. The letter enclosed a copy of the one written to the company by Martin Leake.

"He shall be impeached!" cried Sam Pendergast. "We'll expel him! This is high treason to No. 9."

Many other members of the fire company gave utterance to similar sentiments; the indignation was general, and very great.

Oscar remained only a few moments after making his important disclosure.

He felt troubled and shaken up by the occurrences of the afternoon and evening, and he went straight home and to bed, where he hoped to forget his troubles in sleep.

No such good luck.

Sleep positively refused to come to him.

He lay tossing and turning, adjusting the pillow this way and that, but all to no purpose. His brain was excited and sleep would not come.

At last he began thinking of the numerous fires which had broken out in Longford of late.

Never had the boys of No. 9 been called out of their beds in the dead of night as often as they had during the past few months, and when at last Oscar did begin to doze off, he was wondering in a dreamy way whether or not there would be an alarm that night.

Just then the bell of the Methodist church began to toll the midnight hour.

Oscar listened, counting the strokes up to twelve.

Then the bell ceased for about two minutes, when, all at once, it rang out again.

No time telling now.

It was a midnight alarm of fire.

Oscar sprang to the floor with one bound, and began to hurry on his clothes.

At the same moment there was a loud pounding on the wall from the adjoining room where his mother slept.

Oscar ran into the passage and called at the door as he dressed himself:

"All right, mother! I hear it! Good-by!"

Then, with his coat over his arm and his shoes in his hand, he ran downstairs, finished dressing in the hall, clapped on his hat, and, opening the door, passed out into the silent street.

The church bell was still booming out the midnight alarm.

Oscar could see no glow in the sky, but in the distance he could hear a voice shouting:

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

It might be one of the watchmen, or one of the boys of No. 9.

Oscar dashed up to Main street, running right into Pete Dayton by the town pump.

"Where is it, Pete?" he panted, "do you know?"

"No, I don't," replied Pete. "I was just going to ask you. More of the work of those infernal firebugs, I suppose."

"There's firebugs around, that's certain," said Oscar, as they ran on together. "All these fires we have had of late could not set themselves."

"It's down by the woolen mill, they say!" exclaimed Joe Titus, who met them at the corner of Pleasant street.

"I just met Mr. Rainsford coming up Carleton street, and that's what he told me."

"Rainsford!" cried Oscar. "What in the world is he doing out this time of night?"

"Give it up! Didn't ask him. Hello! Some of the boys are ahead of us. The door is open. Hustle! Hustle! We have got to show the people of Longford that the boys of old No. 9 are some good after all."

About a quarter of the company were already in the engine house, and others came tumbling in.

Martin Leake was not among them.

"Where's the captain! Why don't Martin come? What in thunder are we going to do?" one and another exclaimed.

"We don't wait one minute for him, if I have got anything to say about it!" Joe Titus exclaimed. "I vote that Oscar Everding take the trumpet. There's no use fooling away time here."

"Oscar! Oscar!" cried the boys.

"I'd rather some other fellow did it!" exclaimed Oscar.

"Under the circumstances it ought not to be me!"

He was immediately overruled. Sam Pendergast ran and brought the captain's trumpet, thrusting it into his hand.

"All right! So be it, boys!" cried Oscar. "Man the ropes!"

The boys of No. 9 flew to obey the command, and the engine rumbled down the runway into the street.

"There it is! There it is!" shouted Oscar, waving his trumpet, and pointing off toward the woolen mill.

A bright light in the midst of a mass of smoke illuminated the sky, and in the distance many voices could be heard shouting:

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Old No. 9 was ready for it.

The moon shone down brightly upon Oscar Everding as he ran ahead, and, pulling the "machine" behind them, the boys of old No. 9 went dashing down the street.

CHAPTER III.

BRAVE WORK IN THE BURNING HOUSE

Oscar, acting upon Joe Titus' communication, led the way up to Main street, and thence down into Carleton street toward the woolen mill.

He had no sooner turned the corner than he knew that he had made no mistake, for he could look right down to the mill and see the house opposite, all lighted with the blaze.

"Round with her, boys! Round with her easy!" cried Oscar, turning and shouting through his trumpet. "It's the mill!"

He really thought so then, but the event proved that he was mistaken, for, as he ran on, Oscar soon saw that it was not the mill from which the flames proceeded, but the small, two-story frame dwelling right alongside of it, owned by Diggory Doodles, and occupied also by the Widow Sherman and her daughter Cassie.

In short, it was the house which Oscar had left only a few hours before.

Just as this moment the hook and ladder company came tearing around the corner.

Now, the hook and ladder, although occupying quarters of its own, was owned and controlled by the fire company, and Martin Leake was captain of both.

"Perhaps Martin is with the hook and ladder!" thought Oscar, looking back.

It was not so, however. Tom Brand, the regular "Junior of the H. & L.," as he was called, was in the lead.

A moment later and the engine was at the hydrant, while Tom Brand ran the hook and ladder up to the burning house, which was all ablaze on the lower story; the flames came pouring out of the doors and windows, and it was evident at a glance that if any one was still upstairs that escape without the aid of a ladder was cut off.

Oscar took charge here, leaving Joe Titus, whose regular duty it was to make the connection, at the hydrant.

A crowd had already gathered about the burning house, and

in the midst were two men supporting the Widow Sherman, who was raving wildly, and seemed to be entirely out of her mind.

"Is Cassie out?" demanded Oscar, hurrying up. "Is Mr. Doodles in the house?"

The widow didn't seem to know him, but just continued to rave.

"I understand her to say when I rescued her, that her daughter was not at home!" said one of the men. "You can't go in there anyhow, for the stairs are all ablaze, but I guess old man Doodles is in the house, all right."

"He must be saved!" cried Oscar.

"Every man to his place!" he shouted through the trumpet. "I'll attend to the ladder. Here, Tom, help me get it up!"

Now this was not Oscar's regular duty. His place was at the hydrant, but since he had been chosen captain pro tem., he was determined to exercise the captain's privilege, which amounted to doing pretty much as he pleased.

It pleased Oscar to do the rescue act just then.

There was little fear of the mill taking fire, as it was built of stone, and Diggory Doodles' house was separated from it by a space of some fifteen feet, and was but a flimsy affair.

Oscar and Tom now tackled the ladder with the help of two other boys, and right here we must admit that the hook and ladder was certainly a disgrace to Longford. There was but one ladder, and that was old and rotten and barely long enough to reach to the roof of this small house.

"Up with it! Up with it!" cried Oscar, and up it went, falling against the house with a bang, upon which a sharp crack was heard.

"She's broken!" cried Tom Brand. "Confound the old thing! Why don't we get a new one? You can't do anything now!"

"Who says I can't?" exclaimed Oscar. "I go up just the same!"

He ran up the ladder, which trembled beneath his weight, and when he was half way up he saw that one of the sides had split just as Tom had said.

It was in a dangerous condition, surely, and with the flames pouring out from the lower window against it, the condition of the ladder was not likely to become any better if it remained there long.

Oscar broke the glass with his trumpet, and, thrusting in his hand, unfastened the sash and crawled in through the window.

A thick black smoke came rushing out, and there was plenty more inside, still it was not so thick but what Oscar could see old Diggory Doodles lying on the bed.

"Wake up!" he shouted. "Up and save yourself, Mr. Doodles. You will be burned to death if you stay there!"

"Oh, I can't! I can't!" groaned the old man. "Oh, I've been robbed! I've been robbed of fifty thousand dollars! Oh, my money! Oh, my money! Oh, let me die!"

"He's crazy!" thought Oscar, fighting his way through the smoke up to the bed.

One glance showed him that the case was much more serious than he had supposed, for the old man was bound hand and foot, this giving color to his claim that he had been robbed.

There was not an instant to be lost, and Oscar whipped out his knife and severed the old man's bonds, helping him up and hurrying him to the ladder.

While all this was going on, Doodles kept calling out about his money, but Oscar would not listen. "Get down the ladder!" he ordered, sternly. "We'll talk about these things afterward."

Trembling all over, the old man crawled through the window and got his feet on the ladder.

No sooner had he started to descend than the ladder broke in two at the place where it was split, precipitating old Diggory Doodles to the ground below.

A great cry went up from the crowd, and there was a rush to drag the old man away from the burning house.

"Bring up the hose! On with her, boys! On with her!" shouted Oscar from the window, for with Joe Titus and Sam Pendergast in the lead, the hose men were coming now.

Then it was Oscar's intention to drop out of the window, but before he had time to put it into execution, and just as the stream was turned in at the lower window, a faint cry for help reached his ears from the room beyond.

"Merciful Heaven! It's Cassie Sherman!" gasped Oscar. "She is there, after all!"

It was a terrible revelation, for he had believed what the man had said about Cassie being away from home.

As the truth now burst upon the boy, he understood the cause of the widow's ravings. He saw that she had been misunderstood, and that her daughter was actually in the burning house.

Flinging open the door, Oscar ran into the hall.

A blinding rush of smoke met him, the flames from below came rushing up hot and fierce, while the floor, eaten away underneath, seemed sinking beneath his feet.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Oscar beat against the door of the adjoining room fiercely, for it was locked.

He could hear a low, piteous moaning inside, but this was the only answer. Still it was enough to tell Oscar that Cassie Sherman's life was in danger, and that he alone could save her from death.

"Cassie! Cassie!" he shouted. "It is I—Oscar. Open the door!"

"Oh, I can't! I can't!"

The answer came faintly. That there was no help to be looked for from Cassie was plain, and Oscar, almost smothered by this time, threw his whole weight against the door, and, after two or three attempts, burst it in.

"Oscar! Oscar! Oscar!" the boys of No. 9 were yelling outside, for they gave him up as lost.

A moment later and Oscar appeared at the window, holding the slight form of Cassie Sherman in his arms.

The boys yelled in chorus, the crowd shouted, and the frantic widow, tearing herself free from those who held her, stretched out her arms toward her child.

What was to be done? There was no ladder now!

Some one sung out that some one else had gone for one, but Oscar was not waiting for that.

"Bill Jones!" he shouted down, "if you are not afraid, stand up against the house and let Joe get on your shoulders, he can reach Cassie then, when I let her down!"

Afraid!

There was not one of the boys of No. 9 who would not have done anything Oscar Everding ordered that night.

In spite of the intense heat from the windows, Bill took his position with the flames shooting out all about him, and Joe Titus climbed upon his shoulders.

Very gently then Oscar lowered the now unconscious girl down toward Joe's upraised arms, with the flames shooting out above his head, while the boys of No. 9 crowded around ready to catch Cassie in case Joe should let her fall.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY OF DIGGORY DOODLES.

"Brave! Bravo! Three cheers for Oscar Everding! Three cheers for the boys of old No. 9!"

The crowd went perfectly wild over the brave fire laddies!

Hundreds took up the cry, yelling at the top of their lungs.

All at once the firemen of Longford seemed to have become popular again, although much had been said against them of late, some even going so far as to basely hint that there were fire-bugs among them who started these blazes to create an excitement and give the boys a chance to get away from business and run with the machine.

It was all over in a minute.

We mean the danger for Cassie Sherman, of course.

Oscar gently lowered the girl until Joe Titus was able to throw his arms about her in such a way that he could hold her up.

It was hardest on Bill Jones now.

A dozen and more boys braced themselves against Bill, thus helping him to hold his end up, and others stretched out their hands to receive Cassie as Joe lowered her down.

They carried Cassie, still in a dead faint, to her mother, who screamed and raved more than ever; throwing her arms about the girl she tore her away from those who held her, and unable to bear her weight both sank to the ground, the poor woman calling out that her daughter was dead.

Kindly disposed people now interfered, and Mrs. Sherman and Cassie were conveyed to a house on the opposite side of the street, where the widow was at last quieted down.

Meanwhile things were going along in lively style at the fire.

As soon as his mission was accomplished, Oscar threw himself out of the window and dropped to the ground.

He was none too soon, either, for he was still holding on to the sill when the floor fell with a crash, and the flames went shooting up toward the roof.

"Lay on to the hose, boys!" shouted Oscar, as soon as his feet touched the ground.

He never lost an instant, but took his place with the rest and a good-sized stream was thrown into the burning house.

It was entirely too late to hope to save the flimsy structure, of course, but it was nevertheless imperative that the flames should be checked as much as possible, for there was the big woolen mill to be thought of. If this burned one-half the people of Longford would be thrown out of business, and already the glass was cracking, and the woodwork around the windows beginning to burn.

"Turn the stream on the factory!" cried Oscar, after the fire had been checked a little.

Then the big stream was directed against the larger building.

The boys worked nobly. Old No. 9 hissed and panted, the red coals dropping from the fire-box glowing hotly.

Back to the house again the stream was directed.

By this time the shingle roof was afire, and all thought of saving the building had to be abandoned.

Oscar saw what was coming and he turned and shouted through his trumpet to the crowd:

"Back! Back! Get back, every one of you! The house is going to fall!"

The crowd moved back reluctantly, and Oscar got his men back, too.

Not a moment too soon was this move made.

Suddenly the roof went down like a sheet of paper followed by a fierce burst of sparks and flame.

It was no use to try to do anything further now.

The fire laddies drew back and turned the stream on the mill wall again.

Then came the finish.

The walls of Diggory Doodles' house fell and all was over.

Oscar returned to the charge and the full force of the hose was turned upon the ruins, soon reducing them to a bleak, smoking mass.

All danger to the mill and the adjoining houses was now over and the crowd began to disperse.

It was now nearly one o'clock, and by half-past one the fire was entirely extinguished and No. 9 was back in the engine house.

Before they left the scene of the conflagration Oscar went to the house into which Cassie and her mother had been taken and asked to see them.

Word came out that Cassie was much better and had dropped off asleep, so Oscar did not insist.

"This ought to settle it with Martin Leake," declared Joe Titus, as the boys were wiping off the engine. "A captain who don't show up at the alarm bell certainly is not fit to boss No. 9. I vote that we have a special meeting and have him expelled."

Sam Pendergast chimed right in with this sentiment, and so did Bill Jones and a dozen others, but Oscar opposed it, and thought that no attention should be paid to the matter under the circumstances, and Martin's friends in the company were all of the same mind.

At last the boys separated for their several homes, and No. 9 was locked up.

As Oscar and Joe were turning into Main street, where quite a number of people were standing around talking about the fire, old Diggory Doodles came shuffling up.

"Say, young man," he began in his shrill, whining voice, "I s'pose I owe you something for saving my life."

"You don't owe me a thing, Mr. Doodles," replied Oscar, who had never caught sight of the old miser since he saw him safely on the ground, "but I would like to know how you came to be tied up on that bed."

"Well, so you shall! So you shall!" whined Diggory—everybody in Longford called the queer old fellow by his first name—"but, say, I feel as though I ought to pay you something, although I am so poor that I shall have to go to the almshouse, and——"

"No, no! We don't want anything," broke in Joe, "but tell us how it all happened, Mr. Doodles, and how the fire caught."

"Why, there hain't anything that I can tell you about the fire," replied Doodles. "I s'pose the masked man must have set it. He came into my room and gave me chloroform, and the next I knew I was lying there tied up on the bed, and when the fire began to shoot up I could see that the box which I kept my money in, which stood in a closet, had been broken open and was lying on its side empty. Oh, my money! I shall go crazy! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

The boys half thought that he must be crazy now, for he began to call out wildly and to wring his hands, and then he started off down the street with quite a little crowd after him, for the people had begun to gather round.

"Say, we have had enough of this, Joe," said Oscar. "Come on. I'm going home. I believe the old fellow is half cracked, anyhow. I doubt very much if he ever had any such amount of money as he claims."

But there were plenty of people in Longford who did not share Oscar's views on this subject.

The fire and the story of Diggory Doodles remained town talk for weeks to come, and it became all the more a mystery from the fact that no one could find the miser next day.

Some said that he had committed suicide. Others claimed that he had been murdered—at all events he had disappeared.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN WHO LOOKED OUT THROUGH THE DOOR.

It was some weeks before there was another alarm of fire in Longford, and many things happened in the interim which deeply concerned the boys of old No. 9.

Martin Leake did not wait to be impeached and expelled from the fire company.

Next day Joe Titus, who was secretary of the company, received Captain Leake's written resignation.

A meeting was promptly called, and the question put to vote. The resignation was accepted by a two-thirds majority.

This business settled, an election was immediately held, and by about the same majority Oscar Everding was chosen captain of No. 9.

Oscar immediately stood up, and after thanking his fellow firemen in neatly turned phrases, went on to make a few remarks.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we have got to hustle if we want to put ourselves in the front rank of local fire companies around Cleveland. The new company to be organized in Longford is, I am informed, an assured success, and what is more, they have got lots of money subscribed and will no doubt purchase an up-to-date engine and very likely a first-class hook and ladder as well. Look at our hook and ladder! It's a miserable disgrace. Either we have got to abandon it altogether and cut it loose from No. 9, or we have got to buy a brand-new truck with all its belongings. That's the way the case stands now, boys, and as captain I propose to appoint a committee to solicit funds for this purpose from the citizens of Longford. I'll be one myself, and I appoint Joe Titus and Sam Pendergast as the other two. Now, then, boys, what I say is hustle! hustle! hustle! Let's get down to business as quick as we can, and show Martin Leake when he parades his new machine through the streets of Longford, for of course he will be the captain of the new company, that old No. 9 is not an engine to be ashamed of. We can do it! We must! We will!"

It was a ringing speech, and the boys applauded it to the echo, then dispersing with their minds made up to put their shoulders to the wheel.

Oscar worked like a Trojan. Every night after business hours he was out soliciting subscriptions, and he alone raised a thousand dollars toward a new truck and new hose and fire apparatus generally.

Joe and Sam worked equally hard in their way, and between them they raised nearly as much more, and the result was that before the new company got their engine and truck, old No. 9 had theirs in an up-to-date condition, and the engine put in perfect repair.

Meanwhile things were getting no better at the store of Rainsford & Ramy.

Martin Leake never opened his lips to Oscar except on business, and when he was forced to speak of that he did it in such an offensive manner that it was all Oscar could do to restrain himself.

The explosion came at last one day about three weeks after the midnight alarm.

It was just at the closing hour when Oscar was working over his stock book. Martin came swaggering up to him with his face red and flushed, and a wicked look in his eye.

"We are seven cases of hosiery short, Everding," he said offensively. "What does it mean?"

Now, as Martin had absolutely nothing to do with the stock, Oscar looked up in some surprise.

"It's not my place to render an accounting to you, Martin Leake," he said quietly. "I know there is a shortage, however. I discovered it this afternoon, and as soon as Mr. Rainsford comes I shall speak to him about it, but I've nothing to say to you."

"Well, you will have to, then!" cried Martin. "My uncle has put the stock in my charge. Let me see that book."

"No, sir!" flashed Oscar.

"Let me see it, I say!" roared Martin, making a grab for it,

but Oscar threw himself in front of the desk and gave Martin a slight push at the same time.

He had better have given him his lesson at once.

Martin, boiling with rage, raised his hand to strike him.

He struck at the empty air, however, for Oscar dodged and at the same time quick as a flash gave Martin a good one under the right ear which sent him reeling back against the high stool.

Cassie Sherman, long since back in her place, gave a scream in which half the girls joined.

Over went the stool and down went Martin with it, cutting his head against the corner of the counter, and at the same instant the door opened and Mr. Rainsford came tearing out.

"What's this! What's this! Fighting!" he cried. "How dare you strike my nephew? You're discharged! Take yourself out of here as quick as ever you can."

"Mr. Rainsford, it is not my fault!" protested Oscar, whose face was as pale as death. "I want to say, sir, that——"

"Get out!" roared Rainsford, seizing Oscar by the shoulders and pushing him toward the door. "I'll talk to you when you come for your money to-morrow! Not now! Not now!"

Oscar was terribly excited, too much so to say or do a thing.

He walked straight to the hat room and thence to the street.

"It's all up, mother! I'm bounced!" he exclaimed, upon entering the widow's cottage a little later. "I was afraid it would come to this."

Mrs. Everding was almost as much disturbed as her son when she heard Oscar's story.

She shed tears and talked about starving, and then began to blame the fire company for her boy's troubles.

"It all comes of joining that engine company," she said. "It is always so. It leads to bad habits and quarrels. Oh, Oscar, I wish you would resign."

Oscar was greatly troubled, but he knew how to handle his mother, so he just threw his arms around her and drawing her close up to him, said:

"Now, mother! Now, mother! That's all nonsense. Has being long to No. 9 ever brought one bad habit to me? Do I drink? Why, you know I never tasted liquor in all my life. Do I smoke or swear or steal. You know I don't. Because a boy runs with the engine I claim it need not make him any the less a gentleman, and I try to be one at all times. Never you mind about this. I can get a place in the mill if worse comes to worst."

Before Oscar was through supper Mrs. Everding was pretty well quieted down.

"I can trust you, Oscar," she said, as he was leaving to go around to the engine house. "I have the utmost confidence in you, my son."

There was no meeting that night, just a little informal gathering of the committee on repairs and improvements to look over certain bills which had fallen due.

After the business was disposed of the boys sat around talking till nearly eleven o'clock, when they broke up and started for home.

Not a word had Oscar said about his discharge, for he rightly felt that the engine house was no place to discuss private business, but his mind was full of it as he walked along Main street.

The missing hosiery cases worried him. He could not get them out of his head.

"If I could only get into the cellar and run over the stock I might find out something worth knowing," he said to himself a dozen times over that evening while talking with the boys.

Why not? He had the key of the back door of Rainsford & Ramy's store. The gas lighted in the cellar could not be seen from the street, and Oscar knew that he could work there for a time with perfect safety; at least he thought so, and he re-

solved to try it, so when he came to Cross street he slipped around into the alley and hurried toward the door.

He had almost reached it when the door was suddenly opened a mere crack and a man's face peered out.

The instant he caught sight of Oscar he pulled the door shut again and at the same moment the captain of No. 9 caught sight of a glow of light between the iron shutters.

"For heaven's sake what is this?" gasped Oscar. "The store is on fire! It is, just as true as I live!"

CHAPTER VI.

OSCAR ARRESTED ON A SERIOUS CHARGE.

Here was serious business!

That a firebug was at work in Longford Oscar had never doubted since the midnight alarm a few weeks before.

Had he just caught sight of the villain who had caused so great a destruction of property in the town during the past year.

Oscar never hesitated an instant.

His difference with Martin Leake and his employer must not be allowed to stand between him and his duty as a fireman. Oscar never for a single instant allowed himself to entertain such an idea.

He ran to the door and tried to open it, but found it as firm as a rock.

Inside Oscar could hear the crackling of flames. The fire was evidently making headway; there was not a minute to lose, and in all probability it was already too late to hope to extinguish the blaze without the help of No. 9.

Oscar slipped the key out of his pocket and had the door open in a jiffy. The instant he threw it back he saw that unless prompt aid was rendered the store was doomed.

In one corner of the floor was a long rack upon which lace curtains were hung in order that they might be better displayed.

It was here that the fire had started.

The curtains were all ablaze, and, worse still, there, heaped up upon the floor, was a pile of excelsior blazing furiously.

There was nothing to be done.

Oscar saw at a glance that he could never put the fire out, and to attempt to catch the firebug would only insure the destruction of the store.

It was fireman's duty first, all other things afterward with the captain of No. 9.

Oscar rushed out, slammed the door after him, and tore down the alley like mad, rounded the corner into Cross street, and running up the steps of a small house a few doors above the Methodist church, began pounding furiously upon the door.

Immediately a window was thrown up and a man looked out.

"Hello! Is that you, Oscar?" he called. "What in thunder is the row?"

"Fire, Mr. Bowles! Fire!" shouted Oscar. "Rainsford & Ramy's! Quick! Quick!"

"I'll be right down as soon as I can get my trousers on!" replied Mr. Bowles, who was the sexton of the church.

"Shake up the boys! Don't lose an instant!" shouted Oscar. "I'll run around to the engine house!"

In less than three minutes the big bell was booming out the dread summons once more.

Oscar worked like a beaver to save time when the boys should come.

He threw open the doors of the engine house and single-handed did the work of four or five men toward getting the engine ready.

The alarm was promptly responded to, for most of the mem-

bers of the fire company lived in the immediate vicinity of the engine house.

Sam Pendergast was the first one in.

Joe Titus and Bill Jones were the next, coming in together, and a moment later half a dozen others came dashing down the street.

Oscar seized his trumpet, clapped on his fire hat and shouted:

"Man the ropes! Hustle, boys! Hustle! Let her go!"

The boys flew to obey, and old No. 9 came rumbling down the runway, and was rolling up the street in less than ten minutes' time from the moment of the discovery of the fire.

"Shall we take the Cross street hydrant or the one by the post-office on Main street?" cried Joe Titus.

"Cross street!" answered Oscar. "Run ahead, Joe, and open it. That will save a few minutes' time!"

Joe let go the rope and dashed on in advance while the boys ran the engine around the corner.

The Cross street hydrant was decidedly the best, as it faced the alley. Joe had the cap all unscrewed, and as the hose was run out he removed it, and with Bill Jones' help made the connection.

Oscar was half way down the alley with the end of the hose by this time.

He threw himself against the door, but once more it refused to open.

It had been locked on the inside during his absence, and the key was in the lock, so that his own was useless.

"Axes!" shouted Oscar through his trumpet. "Quick! Quick!"

Bill and Sam came running up with them, and from the other end of the alley several men came running, too.

Mr. Rainsford was one, Martin Leake another, and the town constable, who carried a dark-lantern, was there, too.

By this time the fire was glowing through the second-story window.

"There he is!" shouted Martin, as the constable flashed a dark-lantern upon the boys. "I saw Oscar Everding come out of that door and lock it ten minutes ago."

"Arrest him, Mr. Collier!" cried Rainsford. "He's the firebug. This is his work."

"It's a lie!" cried Oscar. "I——"

"No time for talk now, young man," exclaimed the constable, and he clapped a heavy hand on Oscar's shoulder.

"Break in the door!" roared Rainsford. "I'll reward every one of you boys handsomely if my store is saved!"

CHAPTER VII.

OSCAR LAID LOW.

"You can arrest me if you wish, Mr. Collier," said Oscar, proudly, "but I want you to understand that I am entirely innocent of this charge. You have known me a good many years, and you nor no other man ever knew me to tell a lie."

It was boldly said, and in calm tones, which carried conviction with it.

Mr. Collier not only knew Oscar, but had known his father before him. He felt a most profound respect for the memory of the latter, and had always admired the frank, manly way of the young captain of No. 9.

He hesitated for an instant.

Meanwhile, the boys of No. 9 stood perfectly motionless.

Titus and Pendergast grasped the axes, the hosemen under the guidance of Billy Jones held the hose, but no effort was made to do anything toward extinguishing the flames now raging on the other side of that locked door.

"What ails you fellows! Are you mad?" cried Mr. Rains-

ford. "Are you going to stand there idly and let my store burn?"

"Jump into it, boys! Jump! Jump!" cried Martin, excitedly. "Here, Joe, give me the axe. I'll show you how to open that door!"

"I'll give it to you over the head if you stick your hand out for it again!" said Joe, hissing. "You're not foreman of No. 9, now, Martin Leake! You'll find yourself in the soup if you run up against me."

"But good Heavens, boys, do you mean to stand there and do nothing, when every minute is precious?" cried Mr. Rainsford. "This is outrageous! I'll have your character taken away from you! I——"

"Hold on, Mr. Rainsford," said Joe. "You have already taken our captain away from us, and I think I am acting as spokesman for every member of this engine company in saying that not one of us will raise a hand toward putting out this fire until Mr. Collier takes his hand off Oscar Everding and lets him come back to his proper place!"

"That's right! That's right!" shouted the boys. "Give us our captain or we won't work!"

Quite a crowd had collected in the alley by this time, and it was increasing every moment.

Without at all understanding the matter they seemed to side with Oscar to a man, and to regard the whole trouble as a simple piece of jealousy on the part of Martin Leake, who had slunk back among them so as to be out of the way of Joe Titus' axe.

Through it all Oscar never spoke a word after his first manly protest of innocence.

"Let him go, Collier! Let him go!" shouted a dozen voices.

And some one cried out: "The boys are right! It's a shame to interfere with them in this way."

Secretly the constable thought so too.

"Oscar, if I let you go, will you promise upon your honor to deliver yourself up to me after the fire is over?" the constable asked.

"I certainly will," replied Oscar, "but I don't ask it. You can do just as you please."

"Go! Do your duty. I can trust you," said the constable, taking his hand off Oscar and drawing back.

Wild cheering went up from the crowd and from the boys of old No. 9.

It seemed as if everybody sided with them except Rainsford, and he stormed away in the most excited fashion, threatening to have the constable removed from office and to have the charter of the engine company taken away.

And it was then for the first time that a serious suspicion against his late employer came over Oscar.

Was all this a sham?

Was Rainsford simply fighting for time, hoping that the fire might gain such headway that his loss would be total, and that he could collect full insurance on his goods?

And the fire had already gained great headway, for much time had been lost by all this.

Oscar, throwing aside all personal feeling, jumped right in to make the best of the situation.

Seizing an axe from Sam Pendergast, he and Joe Titus attacked the door and soon had beaten it in.

The rush of smoke and flame which came out drove the crowd back.

Looking in through the big store was like looking at a sea of flame.

Any fire captain, not understanding the situation, would surely have given up the building and the block as well, for it looked to be simply impossible for one small fire engine to control such a blaze as this.

But Oscar was not to be so deceived.

He knew the light, inflammable nature of the stock too well, and by no means despaired of confining the fire to that floor.

"In with her! In with her! Rush her! Rush her, boys!" he cried, and seizing the nozzle, he ran right into the store in face of the flames, closely followed by every boy necessary to man the hose.

It was a bold act, but it was not as dangerous as it seemed, for the fire had by this time eaten its way back from the door sufficiently far to make it possible to stand up against it.

The floor, which was ablaze in many places, was not all on fire, by any means, so there was standing room in which the boys could work.

It was no time for talk now, not even to give words of encouragement, for the roar and crackle of the flames were so loud that Captain Oscar could not have made his voice heard.

He could handle the nozzle all right, though, and the big stream went hissing out of the brass pipe, sending up clouds of steam as it struck the fire, and driving the smoke in every direction.

"Open those shutters. Let in more air. We must breathe!" yelled Oscar, for although he knew that this would increase the force of the fire, he also knew that the fire ladders could not stand up against the blaze without it.

Three or four of the boys flew to obey the order, and the heavy iron shutters were forced back.

The relief was immediate, and the fire was not so much increased by the draught as Oscar supposed would be the case.

The water was doing its work just as Oscar knew it would, and in a few moments the fire began to come under control.

Bolts of cloth and ready-made clothing in piles are of slow combustion, and, although there was enough light stuff to make the blaze alarming and the smoke very thick, there was no body to the fire, so to speak.

The boys worked for all they were worth, and within twenty minutes had it fully under control.

Then the front doors were thrown open, and the draught soon carried out most of the smoke.

Mr. Rainsford now came in, as did Martin Leake and others, but neither spoke a word to Oscar, who busied himself with putting out the last remnants of the blaze.

Up on the high shelves there were pieces of cloth burning here and there, and Oscar, with one of the hooks, was busy pulling them down and stamping the fire out, while the boys were winding up the hose.

Just then Martin Leake came swaggering up and stood by the tottering shelving, which was so badly burned that it was scarcely able to bear the weight of cloth upon it.

"What are you doing?" he called out. "Why don't you leave that stuff alone?"

"Who's running this thing, you or I?" retorted Oscar. "I rather think that for once I'm boss here, Martin Leake."

"Then why didn't you keep your hose in till you got through your job?" persisted Martin, seizing hold of one of the uprights which supported the shelving and giving it a little shake.

The whole thing was tottering. It needed but a little harder shake to bring it down.

Martin saw that, and it was just what he wanted to happen.

Instantly he gave the upright a vigorous pull and down came the whole line of shelving with the enormous weight of smouldering cloth upon it.

Martin sprang out of the way in time to save himself, but Oscar, who was stamping upon a piece of cloth with his back turned, did not realize what was happening in time.

He was down upon the floor in a jiffy, buried beneath the fallen mass of half-burned wood and cloth.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE WHO KNOWS.

There was no one near enough to see just what had happened.

Mr. Rainsford and several of the clerks, who had come to the fire, were in the office, where the former had opened his safe and was getting out the books of the concern, while the boys of No. 9 were all in the alley attending to getting the hose back on the cart.

With one hasty glance about, Martin ran around to the other side of the partition, which divided the store here, and disappeared.

It was a dastardly act, but Martin Leake was quite capable of it.

He hated Oscar with a bitter hatred, and now had allowed his feeling to go even so far as to attempt his life, for his action in pulling down the shelving was simply murderous and nothing else.

And he came very near to putting a finish to Oscar's career.

The boys in the alley heard the crash, of course, and they rushed in to see what it was all about.

They found out none too soon.

Oscar's feet were projecting out from under the smouldering mass.

"He's dead! The captain is dead!" shouted Joe, who was of a very excitable nature, and, throwing off his coat, he began to toss the bolts of cloth aside.

Of course every boy jumped in and helped him.

It only took a few moments to clear the rubbish away.

There lay poor Oscar entirely unconscious, with his face burned and blackened, and his collar-bone broken.

Just then Constable Collier and others came running up, so there were plenty to carry him out, and later Oscar was conveyed to his own house, and for two weeks remained there in bed a very sick boy, for brain fever set in owing to the excitement.

During the first four or five days Oscar knew no one.

During this time he was admitted to bail by Judge Thomas, for Mr. Rainsford persisted in charging him with setting the fire, and with stealing the ten cases of hosiery as well.

The last charge was entirely absurd, since there was no possible way by which Oscar could have conveyed the cases out of the store, unless he had brought a cart into the alley at night.

The engine company took the matter right in hand and engaged a lawyer. A dozen prominent citizens of Longford came forward and offered to go bail for the young captain of the engine company.

If the bail had been fixed at \$50,000 instead of \$1,000, Oscar's friends could undoubtedly have secured it.

Meanwhile Rainsford & Ramy found difficulty in settling with the insurance companies.

A strict investigation into the cause of the fire was made, and even without Oscar's testimony it looked suspicious.

One and all the companies declined to pay until the boy's statement could be had.

When Oscar came to his senses he found Cassie Sherman seated beside him, but he was too weak to do much more than recognize her then.

The girl was there the next day and the next, and sometimes it was his mother in her place, and then the doctor or Joe Titus or some other member of the fire company would be there at the bedside, all flitting in and out of the sick room like phantoms of the poor boy's troubled brain.

At last things seemed to straighten out a bit, and one day

Oscar was able to talk to Cassie, who happened to be the one watching that afternoon.

He now learned that Cassie, being thrown out of her position by the fire, had been helping his mother all through his sickness, and it was from the lips of the gentle girl, whom Oscar sincerely admired, that he learned all that had taken place in town since he was laid upon his bed.

After Cassie got through talking, Oscar began asking questions. Cassie tried to check him at first, but Oscar seemed anxious, and persisted so that the girl let him go on.

What were people saying about him? Had any of the boys been to see him? Yes, they had; he could remember that now, and answered his own question. Was he still under arrest? Out on bail? Then, who went bail for him? and so on through a long string.

"You really must stop, Oscar; it won't do," said Cassie, at last. "I shall have to call your mother if you won't be good."

"But I will be good, and so don't do anything of the sort," said Oscar. "Now let me ask just one or two more questions. Has the new fire engine come?"

"Oh, yes," replied Cassie. "It came last week."

"Did you see it?"

"Yes. I happened to be passing the freight house when they were unloading it from the flat car."

"I suppose it is a beauty, Cassie?"

"Well, it certainly is very handsome, and so is the new hook and ladder. It is twice as big as No. 9's hook and ladder. I never saw anything like it before."

"I suppose the new company is all organized?"

"Yes, and Martin Leake is captain. They call themselves the Howards, named for old Harry Howard, a famous fireman in New York, with whom one of the principal contributors to the fund for the new company used to serve."

"I suppose they expect to carry everything before them," mused Oscar. "Never mind, Cassie, the end of all this is not yet. Just wait till I get on my feet again, and you and everybody else in Longford shall see that old No. 9 is able to hold its own."

It was some two weeks before Oscar got about again, but the time came at last.

Meanwhile Mrs. Everding was able to support her humble home only through the help of certain charitable neighbors and the contributions made by the members of Old No. 9.

Not a suspicion had entered the mind of anybody, not even Oscar himself, that the fall of the shelving was anything but the result of an accident.

Martin Leake had opened his mouth to nobody on that subject, and yet there was one person who more than suspected him.

Who this person was, and what he knew, remains to be disclosed later on.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PARADE.

It was a great day when Oscar Everding first showed himself at the engine house.

He was very thin and pale, and walked with an uncertain step.

The boys all cheered as he entered, and a dozen hands were outstretched to assist him to his usual seat.

It was evening, and the occasion was one of the informal meetings of Old No. 9.

"We hardly expected you to-night, Oscar," said Joe Titus, "but I'm mighty glad you have been able to get around. You

know what's in the wind for the day after to-morrow, I suppose?"

"No; I can't say I do," replied Oscar. "What is it?"

"Oh, I didn't know but some of the boys might have been in and told you. The Howards are going to parade so as to let the good people of Longford see their new engine, their fine hose truck and the hook and ladder."

"Indeed!" said Oscar. "They are all right, I suppose?"

"The best that money can buy, and there is no denying it. What do you say, shall we show ourselves, and turn out with Old No. 9 and our hook and ladder?"

"Why should we do anything of that sort?"

"We have been invited. We have a letter here signed by Martin Leake. It is courteously worded enough, and it invites us to take part and make the parade general. Some of the boys are in favor of going, but I, for one, am not."

"Decidedly not!" exclaimed Oscar. "Can't you see that it's only a bluff to put our shabby old turn-out up in comparison with theirs. And yet——"

"Hello!" cried Sam Pendergast, "there's a 'but' to it. Just what I was thinking. I can see something in this invitation, which, it seems to me, might be turned to the advantage of Old No. 9."

"Why, what just occurred to me was this," said Oscar, "everybody knows what we have got. They know that No. 9 is old, that we carry our hose on an old reel of a thing that might have come out of the ark; that our hook and ladder is shabby and all that."

"Exactly," said Sam, "and they are equally well informed that the Howards' apparatus is superior to ours in every respect."

"For which reason," Oscar went on to say, "it occurred to me that we might do a little bluffing on our own account. On second thought, boys, I say let's join that parade."

"But you haven't explained your bluff yet," said Joe. "What is it that you propose to do?"

"Paint up a lot of signs expressing our sentiments, and let the fellows carry them," said Oscar. "I believe if we didn't get anything else out of it, we shall be dead sure to get a lot of fun, and we will also show the Longford people that there is no spite in the make-up of Old No. 9."

A good many of the company present thought this a good idea.

A regular business meeting was then organized, word being sent out to those not present of what it was intended to do.

Quite a number of the absentees came in, and then the meeting was called.

The vote was a close one, but those in favor of parading carried the day.

It came at last, and a beautiful day it was, too.

Bright and early all hands gathered at the engine house, where Oscar had been working quietly for several days.

Oscar was quite an artist in his way, and he had undertaken to paint the placards, having them all ready now.

At ten o'clock Old No. 9 rolled out of the engine house, drawn by the boys, who looked quite jaunty in their new red shirts, black trousers and glazed hats.

Quite a mob of small fry had gathered around the door of the engine house, and they set up a vociferous cheering as the engine came rumbling out, following it to the common, where the hook and ladder, under the leadership of Tom Brand, was already in place, but the shabby old hose cart, which really was a disgrace, did not turn out.

The signs had not put in an appearance yet.

Tom Brand had them stowed away under the ladder, ready for immediate use.

Main street was crowded with people and gay with flags and bunting.

There was considerable cheering as, with Oscar marching at the head of his company, Old No. 9 came on the street; cheers for the well-trying old fire engine and for the captain himself, but it was nothing to the shouts which went up when the Howard, with its gaily painted truck and hook and ladder, turned the corner of Pleasant street.

And no one can wonder at this.

It was a splendid turn-out which came behind Martin Leake, and no mistake.

The engine was all decorated with flags, and so was the hose cart and the hook and ladder, the uniforms of the fire laddies were brand-new, and everything was just right, so to speak; but Old No. 9, which, as the senior engine of the town, had the right of lead, was to surprise them yet.

A little speech was made by the Mayor congratulating Longford upon having arrived at the dignity of two fire companies, and more of the same sort of "taffy," as Joe Titus irreverently styled his Honor's words.

Then the signal for a start was given, and as it came, the signs were suddenly taken from under the ladder by Tom Brand's boys, who were all ready to act, and passed on to those who were to carry them.

There were twenty or more—some serious and some comical. We could not begin to describe them all.

Oscar stuck one in the pipe of the engine, which read:

"Old! Tried! Never found wanting! That's No. 9."

A wild cheer went up from the crowd as they read it—the sign was painted on both sides.

Tom Brand struck one on the hook and ladder which read:

"For sale! We are going to get a new one just as soon as we can raise the cash!"

There was a great laugh at this.

The attention of everybody was now drawn away from the Howards and concentrated upon the boys of Old No. 9 as the procession began to move to the stirring music of the Longford Brass Band.

Up went the hand signs then, each one painted on both sides and mounted on sticks so that they could be conveniently carried over the shoulder.

"Record! a hundred and forty fires!" the one read which the captain carried.

"It's no disgrace to be old!" was Joe Titus'.

"A new broom sweeps clean, if the sweeper understands his business," was Sam Pendergast's motto, and Bill Jones carried one reading:

"No. 9 is all paid for. Wait till the bills come in!"

There were lots of others, and, as each new one went up, there was vociferous cheering.

One reading: "Why don't they wear green shirts?" created a lot of fun.

Martin Leake bit his lips in a rage when he perceived that scarcely any one even looked at the display of the Howards', which, by the way, everybody in town had seen before.

Down Main street to Pleasant the procession moved, and then through Washington street into Front.

Here they were just turning into Carleton street, with the intention of passing the woolen mill, when the fire bell rang out an alarm.

Here was the end of the parade.

From that moment it must be business right up to the handle.

Soon the good people of Longford were to know something of the relative merits of the green firemen of the Howard and of the boys of Old No. 9.

CHAPTER X.

THE ACCIDENT AT THE BRIDGE.

It seemed just too bad that the alarm should come now to spoil the parade, just when everything was going along so well.

But the bell had rung out, and there was nothing for it but to obey the summons, so far as Old No. 9 was concerned.

As for the Howards, they might perhaps have been excused, on the ground that they were not ready for business, but they did not want anything of the sort.

The boys of the new company were all enthusiasm, and most eager to put Longford's new fire engine in competition with Old No. 9.

"Down with the signs! Man the ropes!" shouted Oscar. "Run ahead, Pete! Get the hose! Back to the engine house, some of you! Get the coal wagon up. Now, then, let her go!"

The fire was all laid in the fire box, for Oscar never allowed it to be any other way.

He had already touched a match to it when the engine started, and the draught fanning the flames, helped on the work of steam making as the engine was dragged along.

Martin Leake, who thoroughly understood his business, had issued similar orders, and was handling the Howard in the same way.

The fire seemed to be beyond the woolen mill, on the other side of the creek, for a mass of dense black smoke could be seen rising in that direction.

Down in that part of the town were several tall tenements, in which the mill operatives lived, and Oscar rightly assumed that the fire had probably broken out in one of these.

There was a bridge across the creek at the foot of Carleton street.

It was quite a substantial affair, and the iron work was supported by two stone pillars at the entrance on either side.

The only objection to the bridge was that the space between these pillars was rather too narrow for the comfortable passing of teams, and to make matters more dangerous on this score, the condition of the street at the foot of the hill, as you went down to the bridge, was horrible, and on more than one occasion, when there had been a fire on the "South Side," as the section of the town across the creek was called, there had been trouble in checking the speed of the engine coming down the hill.

"Look out! Slow down! Put on the brakes!" shouted Oscar.

And Bill Jones, who was attending to that part of the business, saw that the order was carefully obeyed.

Even with the brakes on, No. 9 went down the hill flying.

"There's going to be mischief done here some day," muttered Oscar, as one wheel went down in a rut, swerving the engine around.

The boys, by skillful handling of the rope, brought the engine back into the middle of the road, and it went flying between the pillars on to the bridge, all right, and in a few seconds was safe on the South Side.

The hook and ladder immediately followed, and had barely crossed, when the Howard came flying down the hill.

"Gee!" cried Joe Titus, looking back. "Martin will run his new machine into the pillars, if he don't look out!"

It wasn't Martin's fault, however. He had already warned the boys to go slow, and now he shouted the order again, and gave the call for brakes.

It came too late.

The wheel of the Howard went down in the rut, just as Old No. 9's wheel had done, and with the difference that the green hands did not know how to handle themselves in the emergency, for when the Howard slewed around, and it went worse than No. 9 had done, the boys could not bring it back into line again,

and the result was that the handsome new engine went crashing against the left-hand pillar of the bridge, badly damaging it, and throwing it over on its side, while several of the boys dodged, just in time to avoid being thrown down and crushed beneath the wheels.

Of course, the wildest excitement followed.

The crowd, who were dashing down the street in the wake of both engines, lent the boys a hand to right the machine, but this was soon found to be useless, as the axle was broken, and all chance of moving the Howard had departed now.

"It's no use, boys!" shouted the Mayor, who, in spite of the fact that some people might consider it beneath his dignity, had run to the fire with the rest. "You can't get her along now. Send the hook and ladder on! It may be able to help No. 9! Send your truck on, too! Theirs hasn't come along yet."

"Not on your life!" growled Martin Leake. "The Howards don't lend their hook and ladder and hose cart to help out No. 9!"

"Shame! Shame!" many voices in the crowd shouted.

Some of the Howard boys called out, too, urging Captain Leake to do it, others sided with him, and confusion, worse confounded, reigned, and all the while the hook and ladder remained at the top of the Carleton street hill, blocking the way, when No. 9's hose cart came tearing up, in charge of Jim Titus, Joe's brother; Joe following with the coal cart.

"Out of the way!" roared Jim. "Either go on or come back!"

The fellow who led the hook and ladder company for the Howards was one of Martin Leake's particular friends, and he started in to give Jim "back talk," positively refusing to get out of the way.

The wordy argument which followed was too much for the crowd entirely.

"Shove 'em out! Shove 'em out!" somebody cried. "Don't let the Howards do the hog act! Make room for the boys of Old No. 9!"

This was all that was needed. The whole crowd seemed to act as one man, and there was a grand rush for the hook and ladder.

Some of the Howard boys attempted to show fight, but were promptly squelched, while the crowd, seizing the hook and ladder, lifted it bodily over to one side of the street, leaving the way clear for the hose cart to go flying by.

There was just room to squeeze on the bridge, and no more, but Jim managed it all right, and had the clumsy old affair over on the South Side in less time than it takes to tell it, but not ahead of the Howards' truck, as will soon be seen.

Meanwhile No. 9 had reached the scene of the fire, which was in the upper stories of a tall, frame tenement, which stood at the corner of the street.

Oscar took it all as coolly as if nothing had happened, although secretly he could not help feeling a bit triumphant that the new fire engine had come to grief.

A dense crowd surrounded the burning house. Oscar made his way through it, and ordered the people back.

"Look after the hose as soon as it arrives, Pete!" he shouted; and then he called to Tom Brand to throw the largest of the new ladders against the house, for the stairs had been cut off at the very start, and a number of people, men and women and children, were gathered on the roof, and were calling wildly for help.

CHAPTER XI.

BRAVE LIFE-SAVING WORK.

Although No. 9 had lost no time in getting to the scene of the fire, the flames had made great headway before the engine arrived.

On the second floor of the house was a jobbing tailor and cleaner of clothes, and it was here that the fire had burst out.

The tailor had upset a bottle of benzine, with which he was trying to clean a coat, and the dangerous fluid, running along his work bench, had come in contact with a small oil stove, used to heat the "goose."

Instantly the flames were all over the bench, and to make matters worse, there was a gallon of benzine in a can, which stood on the floor, and which foolishly had been left uncorked.

The vapor from the can was ignited, all in a moment, and the can exploded, scattering the burning benzine in every direction.

If the room had been filled with powder, the result could scarcely have been worse, for in a wonderfully short space of time the flames had spread out into the hall, on the stairs, into the back room; all over the floor in fact.

The tailor and his family managed to escape, and so did the people on the floor above, although some of these were badly burned in trying to get downstairs, but those on the top floor were cut off before they had time to realize their danger, and all that was left for them to do was to flee to the roof, where they were now gathered, three women, two men and a little girl, all in a wild state of excitement and fear, as may well be supposed.

The flames were pouring out of every window, even those of the top floor.

The lower flight of stairs was burning fiercely, and the flames were roaring up through the hall in a terrific fashion, which showed Oscar, as soon as he looked in through the open door, that to save the house was simply impossible.

All he could hope to do was to keep it from spreading to the adjoining houses, and to save the people on the roof.

Oh, for the hose! If it was only there to be worked over, while Tom Brand and his brave hook-and-ladder boys were getting up the ladder.

"Help! Help! Save us!" shouted the people on the roof.

"Courage! We'll have you all safe in a moment," cried Oscar, at the top of his lungs. "There's plenty of time! Nothing to be alarmed about! Trust to me and the boys of Old No. 9!"

"Hooray! Hooray! Run her ahead, boys! Run her ahead!" voices were heard shouting further up the street.

It was the Howards' new truck, which had come down the Carlton street hill right behind the engine.

The crowd was in no mood to stand any nonsense from Martin Leake or his backers in the new fire company.

They had simply seized the truck and run it on to the fire, aided in this by many of the Howard boys, who were too noble to sympathize with the hoggish sentiments of their captain.

A wild cheer went up from the crowd—cheers for the Howards, as well as for the boys of Old No. 9, for it was supposed then, by many, Oscar included, that the hose cart had been voluntarily sent along.

Oscar shouted out the necessary orders, and the hose was immediately attached to the hydrant, and to the engine.

Before the clumsy cart which carried the horse for No. 9 came upon the scene, Joe Titus, Sam Pendergast and others had everything ready to attack the roaring flames.

The hose swelled, and the stream flew in through the door, falling hissing upon the devouring element.

What good it could do toward checking it remained to be seen, and Captain Oscar was not troubling himself about it, for just then his work lay elsewhere.

Assisted by Tom Brand, Oscar had got the longest ladder up against the building.

The captain of No. 9 saw, even before he raised it, that he was going to have a hard row to hoe, for the ladder did not

reach quite up to the window-sills of the top story; there was a space of a good twelve feet between the top round and the cornice above.

A man was leaning over the cornice. He was a rough-looking fellow, stockily built, and looked strong enough for any emergency.

"Hello there, captain!" he shouted down. "Hello!"

"Hello! Keep up your courage!" yelled Oscar, who was just picking up a coil of rope.

"My courage is all right," replied the man, "it's the thought of the women folks that's bothering me. Say, I can let them down on to the ladder, if you can only manage to get the end of that rope up to me!"

"Just what I propose to do, boss!" shouted Oscar, dashing up the ladder.

And even this was an act requiring the highest courage, for the flames were pouring out of every window, as has been said, and when Oscar reached the top it seemed, to those who watched from the ground, that he was completely surrounded by the flames, which came pouring out of the window below.

It was not, however, quite as bad as it appeared, for the flames were blown away from the ladder by the wind, and there being plenty of fresh air, Oscar did not suffer much inconvenience from the smoke.

Winding his left leg around the top round, and passing his right under the second round and around the side of the ladder, he thus braced himself, and prepared to throw the rope.

The first throw was a wild one, and the rope's end did not come within several feet of the hand of the man, which was stretched out over the cornice to receive it.

A chorus of dismal cries went up from the women, while one of the men on the roof, a wild, half-crazy-looking fellow, actually howled.

The man at the cornice took it more coolly, however.

"Never mind, boy! Try again!" he shouted down. "You can do it, all right!"

If Oscar had not been weakened by his illness, he would undoubtedly have hit it the first time.

He gathered in the rope hastily, and nerving himself for a second throw, sent it flying straight into the man's hands.

Wild cheers from below. Joyful shouts from above.

Oscar had done it. The people on the roof were as good as saved.

The man showed himself quick to act.

First he tied the rope under the arm of the little girl, and let it down to Oscar.

Meanwhile several of the fire boys had come on the ladder. The child was passed from one to another, and was soon safely on the ground.

The women followed.

All but one took the situation coolly, and that one Oscar had to hold, to keep her from jumping off the ladder when her feet first came upon the rounds.

For the men to come down was easy enough, and in a few moments all were safe, and the ladder was taken away.

Meanwhile Joe Titus had been doing good work with the hose, and had subdued the fire somewhat.

But Oscar said that the case was hopeless, so he turned his attention to the adjoining house, and wet that down thoroughly.

A little later the roof fell in, and the house shortly afterward collapsed altogether.

The loss was a total one, but all the surrounding houses were saved, and the day of the great parade ended up with loud praises of Old No. 9 in everybody's mouth, while the Howards found themselves not only with a case for the repair shop on their hands, but deeply disgraced in the eyes of all right-thinking persons in town.

CHAPTER XII.

UP ON BEAR HILL.

Days passed, and brought no more fires to Longford.

The new engine of the Howards had been sent to Cleveland to be repaired, and had not yet returned, so if a fire had broken out, the whole burden of extinguishing it would have fallen upon No. 9.

Meanwhile Oscar had obtained a position in a feed store, which paid him enough to be able to support himself and his mother with comparative comfort. His health was now entirely restored, and he felt as well as ever.

The big department store was still closed, and nothing had been done toward repairing the damage done by the fire, for the insurance companies had refused to settle, and the investigation was still on.

Twice Oscar had been visited by detectives. He told his story in a direct, simple fashion, which carried conviction with it, and the charges against him were not pushed.

It was already being talked about, all over the town, that the affairs of Rainsford & Ramy were in a very bad condition, and that Mr. Rainsford had been accused by the insurance company of setting the store on fire.

But the matter hung solely upon Oscar's statement, about the man he had seen looking out of the door.

Oscar was not prepared to assert that the man was Rainsford. Indeed, he rather thought that such was not the case, and that he should have recognized his old employer, and he said as much to the detectives, each time they got him to talk.

As for Rainsford himself, he carried matters with a high hand, and walked about town openly.

He did not speak to Oscar when he chanced to pass him on the street, nor did Martin Leake, whose drinking habit seemed to have greatly increased of late.

Such was the state of affairs when, one evening, just as he was sitting down to supper, there came a knock on the door, and when Oscar went to open it, a small boy handed him a letter, and, turning, ran away.

The letter which Oscar opened under the light of the hall lamp read as follows, as nearly as he could make it out, for the writing was certainly very bad:

"Captain.—Probably you would like to know how the shelves came to fall on you, on the night of the fire in Rainsford & Ramy's store. I know. If you will help me, I'll help you. It was no accident, mark that. Come to-night at eleven o'clock to the lookout on Bear Hill. Come armed, and if you don't see me, why keep dark, watch and listen. This is no nonsense. Perhaps we can find the firebug. Be sure to come."

Now the first part of that letter Oscar took but little stock in, but the last remark not only aroused his curiosity, but made him feel that it was a positive duty to pay attention to this queer unsigned missive.

He had no notion of going alone, however, so during the evening, which as usual he spent at the engine house, Oscar confided his secret to Pete Dayton, and asked his help.

"Sure, I'll go with you," was Pete's reply. "You have got to go. If we could only trap the firebug, just think what a big thing it would be."

"That's just the point," replied Oscar; "but another point is whether this allusion to the firebug is anything more than a bait. Any one knowing me would be sure to know that I would

be an easy mark if they struck me on the firebug question: at least that is the way it seems to me."

"But you propose to go, though, don't you?" asked Pete.

"Certainly I do. Have you got a revolver?"

"Yes; but I never carry it. How about you?"

"Oh, I have a good one," replied Oscar. "I've had it for a year or two, but I don't know what kind of a fist I'd make using it, in case we were attacked."

The boys talked the matter over a little further, and it was agreed that they should both go home, get their revolvers, and meet on the bridge at ten o'clock.

Bear Hill was about a mile over on the South Side. It was about two hundred feet high, very rocky, and densely wooded on the side by which the boys were approaching it, for here the trees had all been cut off.

On top of the hill was an old wooden lookout tower, from the top of which, on a clear day, a very good view of Cleveland could be had.

The boys both knew the place well enough, for it was a favorite resort for picknickers from Longford and the adjoining towns.

"It's a kind of a rocky road to travel in the dark, Pete," remarked Oscar, when they reached the foot of the hill. "I almost wish I had brought a lantern along."

"By Jove, that would be a fine give-away," replied Pete; "but by the same token, there's a light of some kind half-way up the hill."

"That's what it is," said Oscar, looking up. "What in the world can it mean?"

Sure enough, far up the side of the hill, a light could be seen bobbing about among the rocks and bushes.

It moved slowly upward, now disappearing, now coming into view again, all in a very mysterious sort of way.

"That's part of our business, sure as shooting," said Oscar. "Hurry up, old man, we must catch up with that lantern, and from the slow way it is going up the hill, I don't think it is going to be such a very difficult thing to do."

The boys now hurried on up the hill, making their way, easy enough, until they drew near the tower, where they were obliged to make a wide detour, in order to avoid a deep rift in the limestone formation of the hill, which formed a narrow ravine, extending in either direction for a distance of several hundred feet.

The lantern—or rather the person who carried it—had, in the meantime, gone around the end of the rift, and for the last few minutes the light had not been seen.

Now suddenly it popped into view again, directly opposite to where the boys had halted, but on the other side of the ravine, of course, coming out from behind a pile of rocks.

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Pete, in a whisper. "Oscar, just look over there!"

"Down! Down! We mustn't be seen!" breathed Oscar. "Why, it's old man Rainsford himself!"

It was no one else. Flashing the light ahead of him, Mr. Rainsford went picking his way among the rocks, taking as straight a course as he could for the watch tower.

Here was a mystery.

What in the world had brought the merchant up on Bear Hill at this hour of the night?

Oscar, as he and Pete stole around the rift, felt that he was on the verge of an important discovery, as indeed he was, for they had no sooner reached the pile of rocks on the other side of the rift than a man suddenly rose up before them.

"By thunder! The dead come to life!" gasped Oscar.

It was the missing Diggory Doodles, who had thus suddenly appeared in the night.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO TREACHEROUS FIREBUGS.

"Well," said Diggory Doodles, as Oscar and Pete Dayton suddenly stopped and stared at him. "Well, what are you two fellows doing here?"

The old miser spoke in that gruff, choky voice which everybody in Longford knew so well.

He looked older, shabbier, and altogether very much the worse for wear than the boys had ever seen him before, but other than that there seemed to be nothing the matter with him, and his little pig eyes blinked and winked just as they always did when he tried to fix them on any one, which was a very difficult thing for him to do.

"Why, we are taking a walk," replied Oscar, hardly knowing what to say. "I might ask you the same thing, Mr. Doodles. Everybody in Longford believes you to be dead. What the mischief are you doing here?"

"Dead! Dead! Do I look like a dead man," growled Doodles. "No, sir. I'm worth a dozen dead men yet, but don't lie to me, boy, don't lie to me. You did me a big service on the night my house burned down. I'm the best friend you have got in this world, and don't you forget it. Wait and see."

Oscar hardly knew what to say to this, for he was not strictly adhering to the truth, of course. To change the subject he asked about the money the old man claimed had been stolen from him on the night of the fire.

"Never have seen a cent of it, and never will, until I get the thief foul," replied Doodles. "That's what I am working on now. That's what I am trying to do; that's why you are here to-night to help me! Ha! Ha! Ha! You don't understand!"

Doodles laughed like a crazy man; his eyes blinked and winked all the harder, and there was a fierce, wicked look in them which made Oscar almost afraid of the old man.

"I do understand now, although I didn't before," he said. "It was you who wrote me the anonymous letter. You are the cause of my being here to-night."

"That's right," chuckled Doodles. "That's right, boys. I am the man. Tell the truth and shame the devil. You have done the first, but you can't do the last. I am the devil, and I'll defy you or any one else to shame me."

"Where have you been all this time?" asked Pete, who never knew exactly what to say in an emergency.

"None of your business!" flashed the miser. "I am here to talk with Oscar. You can go along, too, and be a second witness if you want to, but I advise you to hold your tongue."

"I guess I'll do as I please about that," retorted Pete, and he was going on to say more, when Oscar put out his hand and checked him.

"Now come to business, Mr. Doodles," he said. "If we are here to meet you, tell me what you want me to do, and, if I can, I'll do it. I'm in a hurry, too. I've got something I want to do for myself."

"No, you haven't. Take it easy, young man. You saw Ratcliffe Rainsford go into the tower. You want to know what he is there for and all about it. That's what you have got to do for yourself—Isn't it so?"

"I see you know all about it," said Oscar, more surprised than ever. "Hurry up and explain, so that I may understand it, too."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed Doodles. "That's it! That's the way with you young fellows—always in a hurry. I'll tell you. It's a plot! I'll tell you something else. You are to be witnesses that he said it! Ha! Ha! Rainsford is a scoundrel. So is that precious nephew of his, Martin Leake! Ho! Ho! I'll tell you something else still. It was Martin Leake who

pulled the shelving down on top of you the night of the fire in Rainsford's store. He meant to kill you! Ho! Ho! Ho! That's right, he came pretty near doing it, too."

"What!" cried Oscar. "Is that so! How do you know it?"

"Know it! I know it because I was in the store and saw him do it, that's how I know it."

"You in the store!" cried Oscar, a strong suspicion that Doodles might be the man who looked out through the door of Mr. Rainsford's store flashing over him. "Tell me more. I want to know all now."

"Not now! Not now!" said Doodles. "Follow me, boys. We have got work to do here to-night. I have set a trap to catch a scoundrel, and I want your help to spring it, but promise me one thing—you will make no move in this business until I give the word."

Oscar readily gave the promise, for he was most curious to see the outcome of this strange affair.

He had no sooner done so than Doodles, with a quick "follow me, boys," started off along the ridge toward the tower.

He walked so rapidly that it was next to impossible for the boys to pick their way in the darkneses and keep up with him.

In a moment he had reached the door of the tower, and he popped through it and disappeared.

"Well, well, well! This is a great note!" whispered Pete. "Say, Oscar, what do you think of the old duffer, anyhow? Is he off his base or not?"

"He undoubtedly is," replied Oscar, "and I shouldn't wonder a bit if he was a firebug into the bargain."

"Hello, hello! What's this? Something you haven't told me?"

"Well, you; I don't tell all I know, but we won't talk about it now. This is business. We must make a move."

"Aren't you going to wait for Doodles?"

"Indeed I am not. I don't believe we shall see him again. Besides, he told us what to do, when you come to think of it."

"That's right. So he did. Said we were to be witnesses."

"Which means that we are to overhear what Rainsford is saying to him inside the tower now. Come on. There's the window. No trouble about hearing. Only thing is to keep shady, and I guess we can manage to do that all right."

Oscar crept up close to the tower window, taking his place on one side of it, while Pete did the same on the other. The glass was almost all broken, and there was no trouble in both seeing and hearing all that was going on inside.

Rainsford was standing with his back against the tower stairs, with Doodles in front of him. The old miser was chuckling in a silly way. His face had an absolutely idiotic expression. Rainsford was watching him keenly, but did not speak for a moment or two, after the boys took up their positions at the window, when he suddenly broke out with:

"Come, now! Come, now, old man, enough of that. You brought me here to-night. Now what do you want?"

"I brought you here?" chuckled Doodles. "You know better than that. Didn't you ask me to do it? Didn't you meet me in the woods and tell me that you would give me a hundred dollars to do it? Ha! Ha! Ha. Say, isn't that the truth?"

"Well, perhaps it is," replied Rainsford; "but you appointed this meeting, and that is what I mean. Now, look here, Diggory, you and I have been acquainted for many years, and we have done some business together. That the last job failed was on account of that young upstart, Oscar Everding. No one would have imagined that he would have been able to put the fire out, but it won't be so with the woolen mill if we are shrewd."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Right, right, right!" chuckled Doodles, "and if I do it you will help me to get my money back?"

"Yes, I will. I promise you."

"You say you know the man who stole it; the scoundrel who

“tied me up and set my house afire and ruined me. Is that right? Is that right?”

“It is. I know him and I have power over him. If you will fire the woolen mill and help me to have revenge on the company and prevent them from starting the new store in town which they propose to start, I will get your money back, and give you a hundred dollars right now.”

“Done,” said Doodles. “Let’s see your money.”

Rainsford immediately drew a roll of bills from his pocket and counted out the cash, which the old miser clutched with an eager hand.

“When is it to be?” he asked.

“To-morrow night,” replied Rainsford. “I’ll meet you at the ruins of your old house at midnight. I shall have a key to the gate of the mill yard and another one to one of the doors.”

“But the watchman?”

“Will not be there. I shall fix that. Any further questions?”

“No.”

“You’ll be there?”

“Yes.”

“Good enough. Now I’m off, and next time we meet let it be somewhere else than in this infernal hole, for I almost broke my neck getting up here and—ha! What’s that?”

A sharp cry and the sound of a struggle was heard outside the tower.

“Somebody here? Somebody listening?” gasped Rainsford, while Diggory Doodles broke out into a wild, insane laugh, slapping his knees, and jumping up and down like a man who was altogether mad.

Mr. Rainsford, with his face as pale as death, waited for nothing. Seizing the lantern he ran out of the tower, and never even stopping to go around to the other side to find out what the matter was, hurried along the ridge, and, plunging into the woods, disappeared.

CHAPTER XIV.

HE HO! HE HO!

Perhaps Diggory Doodles was actually mad, and perhaps he wasn’t, it is hard to tell, but there certainly was method in his madness, as Oscar and Pete had already found out.

The captain of Old No. 9 was in trouble, and Pete was right in it, too, for while they stood listening to the plottings of the firebugs at the tower window, they were suddenly seized from behind and tumbled over upon the ground by two of the dirtiest-looking tramps they had ever laid eyes on.

The job was done as quick as lightning, and Doodles was around the tower and upon the scene without an instant’s delay.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! You have got ’em, boys,” he chuckled. “Good! Good! Good! That’s the talk. Tie ’em up and bring ’em inside.”

“How about the pay, old man?” demanded one of the tramps. “You were to whack up whatever you got out of that feller—are you going to do it now?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” murmured Doodles. “He gave me fifty dollars. Here it is, boys! Here it is. Ha! Ha! I love money! I love money, but I love revenge! Oh, yes, I love revenge!”

He handed over the fifty dollars, and as he had taken care to divide the money received from Mr. Rainsford into two parts, the tramps did not suspect that he had any more.

All this time Oscar and Pete were struggling and protesting, but it was no use, for the tramps held them fast, and, to make matters more interesting, Doodles whipped out a pistol and

covered the boys, a dark-lantern, which he had taken from his pocket, enabling him to see what he was about.

The two tramps went right to work now to finish up their job.

One of them produced a ball of strong cord, with which the boys’ arms were securely tied behind them, and in this condition they were marched into the tower at the point of the revolver and forced to mount the stairs to the small landing about ten feet up from the ground.

From here on there were no stairs, they having decayed and fallen down some time before, and in their place was a ladder leading up to the lookout station at the top.

It was a difficult matter to get the boys up this ladder with their hands tied, but one of the tramps, who was a perfect giant, managed it by supporting them from behind, and when they were safe in the lookout station their legs were tied up like their hands and they were tumbled over in a corner, Diggory Doodles chuckling all the while these operations were going on.

“There you are!” he said, after the tramps had gone down the ladder. “Now stay there and listen for the fire bell. You won’t balk my plans this time, Oscar Everding. I wanted you to know what was going on so that you could enjoy it. Ha! Ha! Ha! We’ll burn down all Longford before we are through. They burned my house, and I’ll burn their mill! Ho! Ho! Ho!”

“He went down the ladder, and the boys heard him take it away and throw it down the stairs.

“Are you up there? Are you up there?” he called from the ground. “Stay there! Starve to death! You’ll never see Diggory Doodles again. Ho! Ho! Ho!”

The next day people in Longford were all wondering what had become of Oscar and Pete, for the mothers of both the boys, alarmed at their absence, had reported the case to the police.

Everybody was talking. The boys could not be found, and many were ready to believe that Oscar had run away, knowing that the day fixed for his trial was close at hand, and that he had induced his old chum, Pete Dayton, to go with him. Of course, many of Oscar’s friends refused to credit the rumor, but as the day wore on this came to be the general belief.

Meanwhile Oscar and Pete remained just where Diggory Doodles had left them, and the situation was unchanged as the midnight hour again drew near.

It had been a fearful day for the boys, and their suffering can be better imagined than described, but through it all Oscar remained cheerful and positively would not give up in despair.

It would be interesting to follow Oscar and Pete through all those lonely hours, but other and more interesting things still demand our attention, so we propose to take them up at about eleven o’clock, when, after nearly twenty-four hours of imprisonment in the old tower on Bear Hill, their situation still remained unchanged.

Pete had dozed off then, but Oscar was wide awake, waiting, listening, wondering and hoping and fearing, too, for a fearful wind storm was raging outside.

It began with a brief thunder storm in the afternoon, and then the wind began to blow harder and harder, until now it was sweeping over the hill like a cyclone.

The tower rocked and trembled. It seemed as if every gust must send it tumbling over.

No wonder Oscar felt afraid, and he was afraid for the Longford Woolen Mills, too, for if the plot of the two firebugs succeeded, nothing but total destruction to the town’s greatest business interest could come on such a night.

Another gust came and still another. This time it seemed as if the tower actually leaned away over to one side.

“Wake up, Pete!” shouted Oscar. “I believe the blamed old thing is going over. Wake up, boy!”

Pete did not hear the shout, for he still slept on, but some one else did, and that some one was on the ground.

"Is anybody up there in the tower?" a voice sung out. "Hello! Hello!"

Oscar's heart gave a great bound.

"Hello!" he fairly yelled. "Hello!"

"Hello!" came the answer from the ground again. "Oscar, is it you?"

"Joe Titus!" shouted Oscar, recognizing the voice above the howling of the wind.

"Yes, yes!" this time from the side of the tower on which the door was. "Thank goodness we have found you. Come on, boys! They are up there. The tramp told the truth!"

That was the time Oscar felt that he had kept hopeful to some purpose, but all in the same instant despair seized him at last.

Another gust of wind, stronger than any that had preceded it, struck the tower, blowing it clean out of existence.

Joe Titus, Sam Pendergast, Bill Jones and one or two other of the fire boys of Old No. 9 had just time to spring back out of the way when the crazy old structure came down with a crash.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIRE IN THE WOOLEN MILL.

"Great guns! That's the end of the captain!" gasped Joe Titus, soon as he was able to speak.

"Not much!" answered a cheery voice from the wreck.

"Hello, Joe! Hello!"

Then there was a grand rush on the part of all the boys for the cupola of the tower, which, as luck would have it, came down to the ground intact, and now lay on top of the ruins of the crazy structure.

Oscar and Pete, pretty well shaken up but not hurt a bit, were inside, and there the fire boys found them when they came rushing in to the rescue, and in a minute more they were free.

It was all talk and handshaking for the next few minutes.

How had it happened? Whatever brought them there? These and a hundred other questions were fired at Oscar and Pete, and Oscar told the story, omitting only the mention of names.

He had cautioned Pete to be equally reticent in this particular.

"We want to catch Rainsford in the act, if possible," he declared, "and there is just one way to give us the chance to do it, and that is to keep mum on names."

So the boys kept a still tongue and talked about the firebugs and named no names, and the others took it for granted that they did not know who the plotters were.

Next question was what brought the rescuing party to the tower.

Joe Titus explained that in answer to Oscar's question, and in a very few words.

"Why, you can thank your big tramp for that," he said. "You see, we have been hunting for you pretty much all day, and, along about ten o'clock, while we fellows were all sitting in the engine house wondering what on earth had become of you, we heard a knock on the door. Sam went and opened it, and he saw a big tramp hurrying away down the street. Sam called after him, but he paid no attention and put around the corner and was gone. We all thought he was just fooling, until Sam saw a letter lying on the doorstep. Here it is, Oscar. You can read it for yourself."

So while Joe held the lantern Oscar read the ill-spelled mis-sive, which ran as follows:

"If you fellers in there want yer captain, you will find him upstairs in the ole tower on bare hill."

Oscar handed back the letter without further comment than "I owe that fellow one," and then exclaimed:

"Now, then, boys, listen to me. This is our chance. We will show the Longford people to-night that the boys of Old No. 9 are not asleep. If we catch those firebugs in the act and save the woolen mill, the new engine company won't be in it. It's a fearful night for a fire, and there's no time to be lost; by the way, what time is it, Joe? My watch has stopped."

"Quarter past eleven," replied Joe, consulting his "turnip."

"Then there isn't one minute to be wasted. I'm so stiff and lame that I can scarcely stand, and Pete is even worse. It is going to be slow work getting down the hill, and twelve o'clock is the appointed time."

"That's all right," said Joe, "and, by thunder, we will carry you if we can't do any better. Don't you fret, Oscar. We are pledged to save the mill!"

It was very slow work getting back to the engine house, for besides the lameness of the boys, they were faint for the want of food, and the wind was dead against them, but at last they reached the engine house just as the hands of the big clock pointed to a quarter of twelve.

"We won't wait for anything," declared Oscar. "We'll run Old No. 9 right down to the mill; there isn't a minute to be lost."

"You'll wait to eat something, then," said Joe, very decidedly. "There's crackers and cheese in my locker, thank goodness, and even that is better than nothing. Look at Pete! He is almost ready to faint now."

This was true enough, but the crackers and cheese helped out both the prisoners amazingly.

By the time they had finished eating, and the engine and hose cart were made ready, the clock struck twelve.

"Come, boys! Come! Shake her up!" cried Oscar, assuming an energy which he was far from feeling. "We wait for no midnight alarm this time. We'll do the alarm business ourselves."

"Hold on!" said Joe Titus, holding up his hand. "Now, Oscar, that's all right. You are all enthusiasm, and as usual ready for business, but there's one thing you seem to have clean forgotten, old man."

"What's that?"

"What is it? Why, if we run the engine down to the mill, stirring up every sleeper on the route, do you suppose for an instant that we are going to catch the firebugs at their work? And that's what we want to do."

"Of course it is. You are right. Suppose three of us go ahead? We can take five minutes' start, and the boys can follow on with the engine."

"That's it," said Joe. "Let it be you and me and Bill Jones. Pete is too much used up to be of any use."

The arrangement was quickly made and the three boys started.

The long walk had limbered up Oscar so that he was quite equal to the occasion, and they ran so fast that they had already reached the mill before the rumble of Old No. 9 could be heard.

All was as silent as the grave around the big building. It was very hard to believe that any mischief was going on inside.

"What shall we do?" whispered Joe, as they halted near the gate, which was securely locked. "If what you heard has been carried out the watchman is not there, I suppose."

"Exactly," replied Oscar, "and, anyway, he is probably in the plot. We can't open the gate unless we break it open, and we can't climb the fence."

"I don't see that we can do anything but wait for the firebugs to come out."

"Who are they, Oscar? Is it really a fact that you don't know? From the way you spoke it has seemed to me that you did."

"I do," said Oscar, "but I am not going to tell. I'm not going to make any charges until I can prove them, that's flat."

"Hark!" said Bill Jones, who had his ear to the keyhole. "It seems to me that I can hear the crackling of flames inside."

"I hear something," said Oscar, "and—by Jove, look there, boys! The firebugs have got in their fine work, sure enough!"

A column of smoke could be seen rising over the fence.

"Fire!" cried Joe. "They have been and gone, that's why the gate is locked!"

At the same moment the rumble of Old No. 9 could be heard in the distance.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" shouted Oscar, running up the street. "Ahead with her, boys! Ahead with her! Run her right down!"

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" cried Joe, and all three ran up the hill.

CHAPTER XVI.

OSCAR MEETS WITH A SERIOUS MISHAP.

There was nothing slow about the boys of Old No. 9, and the way they got the machine down the hill was a caution. In far less time than would be imagined it drew up at the factory gate.

The hose cart was close behind it, but Tom Brand and his boys had not yet arrived with the hook and ladder, nor were they to be expected until the alarm would be given, for there had been no time to attend to that.

There were several axes on the engine, however, put there by Oscar's suggestion, and while Sam Pendergast was getting the hose on the hydrant Oscar and Joe attacked the gate.

"Some one must run with the alarm!" he cried. "We are short-handed here, and we must have the hook and ladder."

"Bill has gone. I started him," replied Joe. "Don't worry, Oscar. Pitch in and we will just do the best we can."

By this time the smoke had so increased in volume that Oscar felt that it could not be long before one of the town watchmen saw it, and the midnight alarm would ring out once more.

Together with Joe he attacked the gate with the axes. A few vigorous blows did the business, and as the gate went tumbling in, the boys burst into the yard.

A bright light shone through the windows of the machine shop and from above the roof the smoke was rising.

Here was the fire, and it had evidently made good headway.

By this time people were beginning to run out of the adjoining houses, which were mostly inhabited by the operatives in the mill.

The cry of "Fire! Fire!" was to be heard on every side, and just as Oscar and Joe began breaking in the windows, the big bell in the Methodist church steeple once more began booming out the midnight alarm.

"That will fetch the hook and ladder!" cried Oscar.

"We don't need it," said Joe. "We can handle this blaze all right! There, now we have got an opening. Run in the hose, boys! Run her in!"

Oscar had already dashed out of the yard to help, and there were many willing hands among the operatives ready to aid.

Nothing was seen of the watchman, however, nor, we may add, was he ever seen again, but it was ascertained later that

the man took the train for Chicago early in the evening. Where he went to no one ever knew.

Oscar seized the nozzle and sprang through the window, the boys aiding him to drag in the hose. The floor of the burning room was now blazing in many places. The boards seemed to have been saturated with benzine or some other inflammable fluid, and the flames were particularly fierce over in one corner, where the woodwork was not only all ablaze, but the fire had eaten its way through to the floor above, which made the situation look serious enough.

But this did not daunt Captain Oscar in the least.

"I'll attend to that corner!" he shouted. "Find the standpipes and turn them on. Flood the floor, boys. Never mind the machinery; if we want to save the mill there is nothing else to do."

Now the standpipes were under the benches, and it might have been difficult for the fire boys to find them, but fortunately several of the machinists were there to help, who knew just where they were located.

Oscar directed the hose toward the corner, and a cloud of hissing steam arose.

A moment later great streams of water were gushing from the standpipes, and the floor was rapidly flooded.

This extinguished the fire in short order, so far as that room was concerned, but through the burned opening in the floor above flames could still be seen.

"We must run the hose up the stairs!" cried Oscar.

"Here comes the hook and ladder!" shouted several voices from the door.

"Get the hose up, Joe. You won't have much trouble up there!" shouted Oscar. "I must put up a ladder to the roof; from the way the smoke rises I think there must be something wrong up there!"

Oscar ran out into the street then. The hook and ladder was just rounding up before the gate.

He looked around half expecting to see the hook and ladder belonging to the new company come along, too, but it was not in sight. The fact was the boys of the new company had been thoroughly discouraged by the wretched showing they had made at the last fire, and being now deprived of the use of their engine, they had not turned out at all.

Tom Brand was all ready for business, though, and he and the other hook-and-ladder boys helped Oscar to throw a ladder up to the roof.

"Get in and help Joe, fellows!" cried Oscar. "If you are needed up here I will call you!"

He bounded up the ladder and climbed out upon the roof.

There was nothing to be seen here, except that the scuttle was open and the smoke was pouring out from the fire on the floor below.

Oscar ran toward it with the intention of shutting off the draught, when, all at once, a man sprang out from behind the big chimney and crept up behind the boy, dealing him a stunning blow on the back of the head with a club.

Oscar dropped like a log. He never knew what hit him, yet if he could have looked around for one instant he would have recognized Diggory Doodles, for his assailant was no one else.

Of course the man was crazy. There could be no doubt about that now.

"You fiend! You fiend!" he mumbled. "You would come here and put out the fire. I thought I had you safe where you couldn't get away, but I'll fix you this time! Oh, yes, I'll fix you this time! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

He laughed aloud, and did not seem to have the slightest fear of being overheard.

Picking up Oscar, who lay entirely unconscious at his feet, he dragged him toward the edge of the roof and tumbled him over.

A loud splash was heard the the body struck the creek, which ran alongside the mill.

"That settles him," muttered Doodles, leaning over the gutter and looking down.

He sneaked around the chimney and disappeared just as one of the hook-and-ladder boys came up over the cornice.

"Hello, captain! Where are you?" the boy said.

Of course there was no answer. In a moment Tom Brand came up the ladder through the scuttle.

"Where is he? Where's Oscar?" he called out.

"Don't see him anywhere," was the reply.

"But he must be here," persisted Tom, and the first thing he did was to go around the big chimney.

He did not find Oscar, however. What he did find was an iron ladder made fast to the chimney, leading down to the water, and what he saw was a boat pulled by a single rower just shooting around the corner of the big carding mill, which jutted out beyond the other buildings owing to the bend in the creek.

"Great Scott! What does that mean? It can't be Oscar!" exclaimed Tom.

But he was not quick enough to see who it was, for almost in the same instant that Tom caught sight of the boat it disappeared.

CHAPTER XVII.

ARRESTED AGAIN.

The fire in the machine shop had now been entirely extinguished, thanks to the prompt action of the boys of Old No. 9.

A great crowd of the mill operatives and others had flocked to the spot and were thronging the yard and even pushing their way into the mill itself, for there were no policemen to keep them back.

Cheer after cheer went up as the fire boys came out of the mill. There were cheers for Captain Oscar and cheers for Old No. 9 and cheers for the fire laddies generally, but Joe Titus, Sam Pendergast and others of Oscar's particular chums scarcely heard them; they were on the roof with Tom Brand then, having followed him up the scuttle ladder.

"I tell you he must have tumbled off the roof if he was here at all," declared Joe; "the idea of Oscar going down the chimney ladder and pulling off in that boat is perfectly absurd."

"I don't say that he did," replied Tom. "All I know is I saw the boat. I couldn't tell you who was in it; I just thought it might have been Oscar, and that's why I spoke."

"It's the work of the firebugs, that's what it is," declared Joe. "Let's get down and get across the creek, boys. Hello! What's that! A fire over on the South Side, as true as I'm a sinner. By Jove, it's Mr. Maturin's house—that's what it is!"

Mr. Maturin was the treasurer of the woolen mill as well as president of the local insurance company. He was one of the richest as well as the most prominent men in Longford, and occupied a handsome residence on the South Side, just beyond the bridge, alongside of which smoke and flames could now be seen rising.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" voices were heard shouting on the other side of the creek, and several dark figures could be seen moving about the blaze.

"Maturin's house is on fire, sure as shooting! What shall we do?" cried Sam.

"It's more of the firebugs' work!" replied Joe. "We must run Old No. 9 right around there."

"But what about Oscar?"

"Oscar will have to take his chances!" shouted Joe, as he made for the ladder. "It's fire duty first, every time!"

This discovery sent Joe, Sam and Tom Brand down the ladder in a big hurry, the greatest excitement spreading among the crowd when they saw the engine again on the move, but it was nothing to the excitement which followed, when, flocking around to Mr. Maturin's house, they found the mill treasurer, Mr. Rainsford and several others gathered in front of the mansion holding between them Oscar Everding, with his hat gone, and his clothes all wet and dripping, and he in the greatest state of excitement that one could possibly imagine.

The fire was out, but the remains of a pile of light brush could be seen up against the house, which seemed to have been extinguished by some one tramping upon it and pulling it apart.

The engine halted at the gate, and Joe, Sam and several others of the fire company went hurrying in, while Mr. Maturin's coachman and the butler kept guard at the gate, and refused to let any one else pass.

"The fire is all out, friends!" cried Mr. Maturin. "Your services are not needed here, but let me thank you heartily for your prompt coming. How is it at the mill?"

"All out there, too, sir," replied Joe.

"I was just getting on my clothes to come over and see," responded Mr. Maturin, but I found that I had my hands full here. Well, young man, what have you got to say for yourself? You haven't opened your mouth yet, except to make a general protest of your innocence, but it strikes me that it is about time."

Oscar was as pale as death, but instead of speaking out as Joe and the others fully expected he would, he was silent.

"Have you nothing to say?" demanded Mr. Maturin, angrily. "It seems to me that if I was in your place——"

"If you were in my place, sir," broke out Oscar, suddenly turning upon the treasurer with flashing eyes, "I think you would do just as I am doing. That's all I've got to say now, except that I am no firebug, no matter what that man may assert."

"You see what sort of a fellow he is, Mr. Maturin," said Rainsford. "I caught him red-handed. You know he is out on bail now, and under charge of setting my store on fire. I guess there is no doubt about his being the firebug which has been the pest of Longford. It's a most fortunate thing for you that I happened to be passing and saw him at his work. I saw the fire at the mill from my window, and was hurrying there to see if I could be of any assistance. As I said before, it's a lucky thing for you that I happened to be passing as I was."

"That's all right, Rainsford," replied the treasurer, coolly. It was a well-known fact that he and the Longford storekeeper had not been on speaking terms for some time past, so no one was much surprised at the coolness with which he spoke.

Meanwhile Joe and Sam would have pressed forward and spoken to Oscar, but the treasurer waved them back.

"You are not in this, boys," he said. "Oscar is in my charge until the constable comes. I have telephoned for him, and expect him every minute. Meanwhile the best thing you can do is to drag Old No. 9 back to the house."

"That's right, Joe," said Oscar. "Get her back. How's the fire at the mill, all out?"

"Yes," replied Joe. "We saw to that before we left. Oh, Oscar, what is all this? Do say something and relieve a fellow's mind."

"I shall do talking enough before I get through," replied Oscar. "Never you mind now, boys. I'm just what I want to be. I'll show up the firebugs of Longford before I get through with this night's work."

"But you are hurt," persisted Joe. "Your head is all cut and bleeding. Mr. Maturin, can't something be done to help him? Captain Everding has just been through with one terrible experience. If I could only speak to you a minute, I'm sure I could convince you that——"

"Don't, Joe," said Oscar, breaking in suddenly. "You are troubling me. I don't want any help. I'm Captain of Old No. 9, and to be accused of being a firebug, even by that man is a terrible charge. I don't want any one to assume my innocence. I want to prove it, and that is just what I propose to do."

"Here comes the constable!" cried Mr. Maturin, as the gate was opened to admit Mr. Collier. "All this talk will keep till to-morrow. Here, Mr. Collier, we have caught the firebug at last!"

It was a terrible thing for the boys of Old No. 9 to see their captain marched off by the constable and followed by a hooting crowd, but that's what they had to see a few moments later on.

It is really remarkable how the sentiments of a crowd will change all in a moment.

Only a few short days before Oscar Everding had been one of the most popular boys in Longford, but now everyone seemed entirely willing to assume him guilty, and not a few called out about lynching, but this met with but faint response.

Joe and Sam followed their captain to the lock-up, while the other members of the company dragged the engine, the hook and ladder and the hose cart back to their houses, deeply dejected by the occurrences of the night.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TAKEN BEFORE THE JUDGE.

After Oscar had been led away by the constable and the crowd has dispersed, Mr. Maturin turned away from the storekeeper, who was still standing on the steps, and started for the gate.

"One moment, Maturin," said Mr. Rainsford, hurrying after him. This would seem to be a good time for us to make up our differences. We have been on the outs for a long while, I have done you a service to-night, and——"

"And I have thanked you for it," retorted the treasurer, turning suddenly upon him. "What do you want; a cash reward?"

Mr. Rainsford bit his lips and his face grew dark.

"You are insulting, sir!" he said.

"Possibly I am. What of it?"

"Sir?"

"Now look here, Rainsford," replied Mr. Maturin. "I know you to be a scoundrel. I found you out some three years ago, you recollect, in connection with that little real estate transaction we had together. It is true that you appear to have done me a service to-night, and——"

"Appear, sir! What do you mean?" demanded Rainsford, fiercely, but at the same time Mr. Maturin did not fail to notice that he turned deathly pale.

"Oh, say, I'm in a hurry," broke in the treasurer. "If I owe you anything, Rainsford, just send your bill to the office and I'll see that it is settled. Good night."

Whereupon Mr. Maturin went out through the gate, slamming it after him, and hurried off down the street without another word.

Mr. Rainsford was in a towering rage. If the mill treasurer slammed the gate hard, the storekeeper slammed it ten times harder, and went stalking off up the street in the opposite direction alongside the privet hedge which surrounded the Maturin mansion.

The street had now resumed its usual deserted air at the midnight hour, and there was nobody in sight when the storekeeper reached the end of the hedge, consequently he was not only surprised, but startled, when a dark figure suddenly emerged from the privet bushes and jumped down off the wall.

"Martin!" he exclaimed, recognizing his nephew, who, as usual, seemed to be much under the influence of liquor.

"Yes, governor, it's me, all right," replied the captain of the new fire company. "Oh, you're a rare bird, you are! By thunder, you carried it off well! Wouldn't have believed it of you though. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Hush, for Heaven's sake," retorted Rainsford, clapping his hand over Martin's mouth. "How dare you talk to me like that, you young scamp? What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? It's what do you mean rather, governor! How dare you talk to me like that, when I know all?"

Mr. Rainsford reeled against the stone wall like a man who had been struck a heavy blow.

"Martin, are you crazy, or what's the matter with you?" he gasped.

"Not crazy for a cent, governor, but I have been drunk. That's how I came to be sleeping under old Maturin's hedge on the inside, where I could see you——"

"Hush!" hissed Rainsford, again clapping his hand over Martin's mouth. "Not another word! What do you want?"

"Well, a check for a thousand dollars would do to begin with, governor," replied Martin, coolly. "After that we'll see."

"A thousand nothings!" sneered Rainsford. "You know very well that until I succeed in collecting my insurance I am hard pressed for funds, and ——"

"I know you're a liar!" retorted Martin. "I know where you have hidden——"

"Enough! You shall have what you want, if you will only hold your tongue," broke in the storekeeper, fiercely; and, seizing the young blackmailer by the arm, he hurried him off up the street.

Great was the excitement in Longford next day when the events of the night became generally known.

As soon as the news reached the ears of Widow Everding, she hurried to the town jail and was admitted to Oscar's cell.

"Oh, my son, my son! So they have arrested you again!" she moaned, after the first affectionate greeting was over. "This is a terrible trouble that has come upon us. This comes from belonging to that dreadful engine company. Oh, how I do wish you would resign!"

"Now, mother, now, mother, don't rail against the fire company," replied Oscar, soothingly. "It has nothing at all to do with it. I'm the victim of an infernal scoundrel. I could easily clear myself if I chose to say a word."

"Then why don't you say it, my boy? Why did you let this disgrace come upon us? I've been poor all my life, but at least I have been honest, and I have tried to bring you up the same way. If you did not set the mill on fire——"

"Hello! Is that what they are saying now?" exclaimed Oscar.

"They are—didn't you know?"

"No. I thought it was only Mr. Maturin's house I was accused of firing."

"They say now that you started the fire in the mill, too, my boy. Everybody in town is talking about it. They say that you and Joe Titus and Bill Jones were seen hanging around the mill gate some time before the fire broke out. I hear they are going to arrest Joe Titus and Bill Jones. Oh, Oscar, I do hope you haven't been led astray by evil companions to do this dreadful thing."

Oscar flushed angrily. "Now, mother, if you can believe me

guilty, who is to believe in my innocence?" he demanded. "Don't you think this is rather hard?"

The widow burst into tears and kept on crying until she went away, leaving Oscar in a frame of mind anything but cheerful, when Mr. Collier came in to take him before Judge Thomas, who was to give him a hearing at ten o'clock.

The place where the constable took him was the Judge's law office, for there was no regular court in Longford, and the Magistrate usually examined local criminals sitting at his own desk.

"Well, young man, this is a serious business," said the Judge, frowning at Oscar as he was marched up to the desk by Mr. Collier. "This is the second time you have been accused of arson, and where there is so much smoke there ought to be some fire. What are we coming to when the captain of a fire engine company starts a blaze for the purpose of giving his men a chance to spread themselves? I don't like this! I don't like this!"

"You will hardly believe me guilty until it's proved, Judge," replied Oscar, drawing himself up proudly. "Remember my side of the story has not been heard yet, but only that man's!"

And Oscar pointed at Mr. Rainsford, who sat glaring at him from the other side of the Judge's desk.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND.

"That is true, young man," said Judge Thomas, rather ashamed of the tone of reproof in which he had addressed the captain of Old No. 9. "I spoke as a citizen, and not as a magistrate. You may rely upon having a fair hearing, but remember, whatever statement you may make of an incriminating nature, is liable to be used against you when your case comes to trial, which it surely will, unless you are able to absolutely prove your innocence here at the examination; in which case the charges will be dismissed."

"I understand," replied Oscar, "but you must remember, judge, that this is a case of one man's word against another's. I don't see how it is possible for me to absolutely prove my innocence, but I may be able to prove some one else guilty if I am only given the chance."

Oscar spoke in a clear, ringing voice, which seemed to fill the whole room. He was nothing if not cool; but then that was his way, and it told on the prejudices of the judge to a certain extent.

"Have you a lawyer to represent you here?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"If you desire, I will appoint one. I want you to have a fair show. You can waive examination until you have time to consult counsel. What do you say?"

"I say no, decidedly," replied Oscar. "I will be my own lawyer. I cannot afford anything else."

"Better think twice about that," replied the judge. "They say the man who is his own lawyer has a fool for his client. Don't forget that this is a very serious affair."

"Go on, judge," said Oscar. "I am satisfied to take care of my own case. I don't want to talk any more about this now."

"Settled," said the judge, rather cross at having his friendly advice rejected. "We will now proceed with the case."

By this time the large office was crowded with people. Besides Oscar and Mr. Rainsford many of the boys of Old No. 9 were present. Mr. Maturin was also there, and Martin Leake and several other members of the new fire company, besides various prominent citizens, who had come in from curiosity, for this second arrest of Captain Oscar had made a great stir.

After a few preliminary remarks and some legal formalities, the judge began the examination.

Joe Titus was the first witness examined.

"I want you to tell about the mill fire," said the judge. "I am informed that you, young Bill Jones and the prisoner were seen by the mill gate previous to the breaking out of the fire, and that the engine reached the mill before the alarm was given. If you choose to admit this, it will save the necessity of calling a witness who is somewhat of an invalid, and who saw you out of the window of one of the mill tenements. Now proceed."

"I do admit it," replied Joe. "We were there, just as you have stated. Am I to answer questions or am I to tell my story in my own way?"

"Tell it your own way," said the judge, "but make it brief."

Joe then began with the story of the disappearance of Oscar and Pete, following with the rescue at the old tower on Bear Hill, and then coming down to the affair of the woolen mill.

As the story proceeded the interest in the room became intense, and there was a manifest change of feeling in favor of Oscar.

Mr. Rainsford sat drumming on the desk, pale, but calm. Oscar, who watched him closely, had little difficulty in seeing his intense nervousness, which, indeed, could not be wondered at, for the storekeeper must have been in deadly terror all the time Joe was speaking lest the next word uttered should expose him to all in the room.

"Now, then, young man," said the judge, when Joe finished speaking, "you have failed to mention the names of these alleged firebugs overheard in the tower. Were you not told?"

"No, sir," replied Joe.

"Is young Dayton here?"

"He is not. He was called out of town. I believe he is gone to Cleveland on business."

"Hum! Well, another question: What became of Everding after the mill fire was extinguished?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Don't know?"

"No, sir. I was told by one of our boys, Tom Brand, that he went upon the roof by an outside ladder."

"And you did not see him after that?"

"Not until I saw him at Mr. Maturin's house."

"Was there any way of leaving the roof except by the ladder?"

"Yes, sir. There was a stationary iron ladder fastened to the chimney leading down to the creek."

"And Everding's clothes were wet when you saw him at Mr. Maturin's house?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do. William Jones will now tell his story."

Bill's story was so exactly like Joe's that it need not be repeated here.

Mr. Rainsford was the next one to talk.

His story was briefly told, and was to the effect that having seen the fire at the mill, he left his house for the purpose of going there. While he was passing Mr. Maturin's hedge his attention was attracted by a light on the other side. He climbed on the wall, pushed his way through the hedge, and saw Oscar Everding in the act of firing a pile of brushwood which had been placed against the house, and which was already blazing at several points. He crept up behind him, seized the young man and, drawing a revolver to protect himself, after stamping the fire out, dragged him to Mr. Maturin's door and rang the bell, telling the mill treasurer what had occurred.

Mr. Maturin came next. His story corroborated Mr. Rainsford's. He admitted that he had not been awakened by the midnight alarm, and that he knew nothing of the mill fire

until Mr. Rainsford's ring at the bell summoned him to the door.

Through all of this Oscar sat silent and calm, waiting for his turn, which now came.

"Am I to tell my story the same as the others have done?" he asked the judge.

"Yes," was the reply, "but as time presses, we will get over this tower business as rapidly as possible. Is the story told by Titus and Jones true?"

"Absolutely true."

"The conversation between the two firebugs has been repeated just as you heard it?"

"Exactly."

"Why did you and young Dayton go to the tower?"

"Because I received an anonymous letter telling me to come there."

"You have the letter?"

"No. Unfortunately, I tore it up."

"It is unfortunate; you should have kept it. One question now, and it is a most important one. Did you know the men you heard talking in the tower that night?"

"I did, sir."

"Who were they?"

"I do not care to state."

"What! You will not tell?" cried the judge.

"No, sir."

"And why?"

"Because I propose to run these men to earth. Because I propose never to let up on this business until I have caught them red-handed. For me to give names here would prove nothing, but give me time and I will prove to the citizens of Longford that I am absolutely innocent, and that one of the last men they suspect is guilty of the terrible crime of which I stand charged."

Oscar spoke in the same clear voice, and as he concluded his remarks there was some applause, which was promptly checked by the judge.

"Go on and tell your story," he added. "I have no authority to press this matter."

Oscar's story began with the blow which he had received on the roof. He frankly admitted that he did not know who struck the blow, and went on to say that the next he knew he found himself in the creek swimming for dear life. As the wall of the mill came right down to the water's edge, he swam across the creek and climbed up the bank close to Mr. Maturin's house, when he suddenly saw a fire on the other side of the hedge. Without waiting an instant he pushed his way through the hedge and began to stamp out the burning brush, which was piled up against the house, and he had just succeeded in extinguishing the flames when he was suddenly seized from behind by Mr. Rainsford, who charged him with setting the fire, and at the point of a revolver dragged him around to the door.

"Is that all?" asked Judge Thomas, when Oscar ceased to speak.

"That is all."

"Mr. Rainsford states that it was he who stamped out the fire—is this true or false?"

"False. The fire was just out when he came upon me."

"You are prepared to swear that you did not set the fire?"

"I am. I had nothing whatever to do with it further than what I have said."

"That is all," said Judge Thomas. "The examination is now concluded. I hold Oscar Everding in \$10,000 bail on a charge of arson. Prisoner, are you prepared to furnish bail to that amount?"

"I am not, sir," replied Oscar, gloomily.

"I am!" spoke up a voice from the other side of the room. "I will go bail for twice the amount if necessary."

All eyes were turned in the direction of the speaker, who, to Oscar's intense surprise, proved to be Mr. Maturin.

The bail bond was then made out and signed, and the prisoner left Judge Thomas' office amid the cheers of the boys of Old No. 9.

CHAPTER XX.

A DASTARDLY ATTACK ON OLD NO. 9.

"Mr. Maturin, I want to thank you heartily for what you have done for me," said Oscar, as the mill treasurer came up to him on the street before the fire boys could hustle him away.

"No, necessity," replied Mr. Maturin in his abrupt fashion. "Just step aside here a minute, my boy. I want to ask you a question or two."

"A dozen if you wish," replied Oscar, and as he turned aside Mr. Maturin said:

"You did quite right not to mention the names of those men, but let me ask you, are they known to me?"

"One is certainly, sir, and I think the other is also."

"Was that one in the judge's office to-day?"

"He was."

"Humph! I thought as much."

"I'll tell you the name if you want to know, sir. After what you have done for me I feel that I have no right to hold it back."

"No, don't tell. You are right. Get your proof first, and then act. I shall also employ a detective, but he will not interfere with your work. I shall see that he doesn't even come near you, for that would excite suspicion. Now, then, Oscar Everding, listen to me; if you land those firebugs, I'll buy a new engine and truck, and present it to the boys of Old No. 9."

"It's a most generous offer, sir, and I shall try to earn it. Let me thank you again."

"No, no! I want no thanks," said Mr. Maturin, turning away, and hurrying off across the common.

When Oscar turned he found his mother and Cassie Sherman behind him, ready to congratulate him.

"Oh, my son!" cried the widow, "let this be a lesson to you to leave the fire company at once and try to get into some regular business. It is worrying me to death."

"How can you talk so, Mrs. Everding?" exclaimed Cassie. "Just think of the good Oscar has done by belonging to the fire company. This charge is false; I know it is. Oscar cannot resign now without practically admitting his guilt."

"Now, then, here's advice for you!" laughed Oscar. "Which am I to follow? Never mind, mother, dear. It will all come out right in the end, and we shall be happy. Thank you ever so much for your confidence, Cassie. Now, let us go home to dinner. You will come with us, of course, and I will tell you all about the affair."

This ended the important events of the day so far as Oscar was concerned, but when he left the judge's office he left one uneasy person behind him, and that was Mr. Rainsford, who scarcely dared to show himself on the street, and when he did come downstairs he hurried across the common as fast as he could go, but not fast enough to escape his precious nephew, who came shooting up behind him.

"Hello, governor!" he exclaimed, linking arms familiarly with his uncle. "Where is that thousand-dollar check?"

"Hush, hush, Martin, for Heaven's sake, hush!" gasped Mr. Rainsford. "If any one should hear you I am lost."

"No one to hear us, governor. Now, look here, I'm about at the end of my rope."

"So am I," groaned Mr. Rainsford.

"Listen," continued Martin, impertinently. "I have run through all the money mother left me, and now that the store is closed and I get no pay I find it rather hard to live. I want money, and I must have it, governor. You understand."

"Understand me, Martin," said Mr. Rainsford, suddenly turning upon his nephew, "I have no thousand dollars to give you. I am a ruined man. I have not only used up all my own money, but all belonging to the estate of my late partner, Mr. Ramy, as well. I depended upon the insurance money to give me a fresh start, and I have not received it, nor, as matters stand now, am I likely to receive it. I am at my wits' end to know what to do."

"You are?" asked Martin.

"Yes, I am."

"Well, I'll tell you what to do, then."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just this: That you are getting ready to jump the town, and when you go you will dig up——"

"Stop!" cried Mr. Rainsford, turning deathly pale. "You shall have the thousand dollars, Martin, and you shall go with me. I'll make it two thousand if you will help me to get my revenge on John Maturin before you go."

Here was an interesting conversation, and one which would have opened the eyes of the good people if they could have heard it, but no one heard it, although many saw the uncle and nephew go off the common, arm-in-arm.

All that afternoon Oscar roamed about among the hills in the neighborhood of the fallen tower.

He felt sure that Diggory Doodles must have a place of retreat somewhere in the woods around Longford, and he was most anxious to find it, but he met with no success whatever.

That night after supper Oscar went down to the engine-house as usual and remained there talking with the boys until after ten o'clock, when every one went home but Joe Titus, and he would have gone, too, if Oscar had not asked him to remain.

"What's up, Oscar?" asked Joe, after the last of the boys had departed and Oscar had turned out the gas all but one light, which was usually kept burning all night in case of a sudden alarm.

"I'm up, for one thing, Joe," was the reply, "and, what's more, I intend to stay up all night, and I want you to stay up with me. Your mother won't be alarmed if you don't come home?"

"She won't, because after I received your note I told her not to expect me," replied Joe. "What's in the wind, old man?"

"Well, Joe, I want your help," said Oscar. "I'm going to do a little detective work, and as Pete has been called away there is no one for me to apply to but you."

"You shall have it," said Joe, heartily. "I think I know what's coming. You are going to tell me the names of those two firebugs now."

"I am."

"Hold on a moment. Let me do a little guessing. I think I can name one of the right now."

"Well?"

"Old man Rainsford."

"You are right. And the other?"

"The big tramp who brought the letter here."

"Wrong. He had no more to do with the case than I have already told you, but I am beginning to believe that the man who struck me down on the roof of the machine shop and the other firebug are one and the same."

"Who, Oscar?"

"Diggory Doodles."

"You don't mean it! I thought Doodles was dead."

"That he isn't I know, and Pete knows it, too, for he was

the man we met on the mountain, and who had us tied up in the tower, and—— Great Scott! What's that?"

Suddenly there was a crash of glass, and some heavy object struck the floor, rolling under the engine, where it lay sizzling and sputtering at a great rate.

"A bomb!" cried Oscar, springing to his feet. "Oh, this is dastardly work! They mean to blow up Old No. 9!"

CHAPTER XXI.

"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?"

"Run! Make for the door, Oscar!" cried Joe. "Run for your life!"

"In a minute," replied Oscar, with his usual self-assurance, and then instead of following Joe, he stooped down and picked up the bomb from under the engine, flinging it out of the window into the vacant lot.

Instantly there was a tremendous explosion, which fairly shook the engine-house.

"My stars, but that was a brave act!" gasped Joe Titus. "I wouldn't have done that for a thousand dollars, cash down."

"Well, if I hadn't done it we should both have been blown to blazes and No. 9 would have gone with us," replied Oscar. "Mum, now. Not a word about what has happened if anybody asks."

They hurried out into the street. Several people had come to the doors of the adjoining houses, and windows went up all along the block, while a few belated pedestrians on Main street came hurrying down toward the engine-house to see what the matter was.

But they didn't find out from Oscar and Joe. When they began asking questions the boys asked questions, too.

When the excitement had subsided they returned to the engine-house and shut the door.

"The question is now, can we leave here to-night?" asked Joe. "After what has happened some one ought to stay on the watch."

"We can't," said Oscar, "and, besides, it would do no good. It isn't likely that whoever threw that bomb has another, or will come back here again to-night."

"Who do you suppose it was, Oscar?"

"Either Martin Leake or Diggory Doodles."

"Would Martin do such a thing?"

"Would he! You bet he would. If Doodles is to be believed it was he who pulled the shelves down on me the night of the fire in the store. He's a bad lot, and don't you forget it. Remember, he is Rainsford's nephew, and that means a good deal."

"Yes, it does, and that's no dream," said Joe. "What was the bomb like?"

"It was a piece of gas-pipe. That's all I saw. I was in too big a hurry to get it out through the window to stop and take its measure, you bet. But come, we must be going, if we want to do that detective work to-night."

Oscar then locked up the engine-house and Joe followed him up on Main street without a word.

"Why don't you say something?" remarked Oscar, when they reached the corner.

"Because I've nothing to say," laughed Joe. "I'm in your hands to-night."

"Which means that you will do anything I say?"

"Exactly. Anything you say goes."

"Well, then, I'm going to stand guard on Rainsford's house to-night, if we have to stay there until morning. Remember,

the time of the fire at Doodles' house we met him coming up from there. So again last night he was out. Put that together with what we know and it looks as though he did a good deal of wandering around at night."

"Right," said Joe. "I'm on to it. I'm with you every time."

Mr. Rainsford's house was located on the south side of the creek at no great distance from Mr. Maturin's. It was rather a pretentious mansion for a childless widower, for that was what Mr. Rainsford was, his wife having been dead many years.

It was an easy matter to watch the house, for on the opposite side of the street was another mansion, the grounds like Mr. Rainsford's being surrounded by a hedge.

Behind this hedge Oscar and Joe now concealed themselves, and there they remained watching a light which burned in the window of Mr. Rainsford's library; they could see the shadow of the tall form of the storekeeper reflected on the shade.

He seemed to be doing a good deal of moving about for the first hour of their watch.

Joe thought he was pacing up and down the room, but at last he sat down and remained seated for a long time.

From the motion of the shadow of his arm Oscar thought he was writing at a desk.

At last, a little before midnight, the light was suddenly extinguished, and a moment later the front door was opened and out came Mr. Rainsford with his hat on. He closed the door behind him, and with a wary look up and down the street, passed out of the gate and hurried toward the bridge which crossed the creek right alongside of the woolen mill.

"Now! Now's our time!" breathed Oscar. "Careful, Joe! If he gets on to us the game is up."

"He won't get on to me," said Joe. "I can walk as light as a cat."

The boys "shinned" along after the storekeeper then, keeping as well in the shadows as they could.

Mr. Rainsford crossed the creek, passed by the woolen mills and turned into a vacant lot just beyond Wadsworth's tannery, an old, deserted structure which adjoined the last building of the woolen mill property.

Of course, the boys lost sight of him when he turned the corner of the fence, and when they came to the lot he was nowhere to be seen.

"There!" breathed Oscar. "That's business. This means another fire. Of course, he has gone over the fence into the tannery yard."

"Then it means that we have got to go after him," replied Joe. "We can do it all right a little farther down toward the creek and he'll never be the wiser."

There was no trouble in scrambling over the low fence, and the boys managed to do it noiselessly enough.

They now found themselves in the yard behind the tannery, which was a crazy old frame structure extending part way down toward the creek, and, on looking toward it, they caught the glimpse of a light inside.

"Firebug business sure," breathed Joe. "What are we to do?"

"Catch him in the act," replied Oscar. "We are two against one, and I've got a revolver. Come on. Let's see what he is about."

They crept on to the tannery and took up their station at one of the sashless windows, through which a full view of the interior of the building could be had.

"By thunder! What does this mean?" breathed Oscar. "This is no firebug business. Has Rainsford gone crazy, or what?"

"Hush!" whispered Joe. "Somebody's coming! I'm sure I heard a footstep behind us in the yard!"

CHAPTER XXII.

MORE VILLAINY DISCLOSED.

"Lay low, Joe! Some one coming, sure! We mustn't be seen here on any account!"

Oscar spoke with great earnestness, for he felt that way. Something seemed to tell him that the strange business with which he had been mixed up now, for several weeks, was at last coming to a head, and he was most anxious not to make one false move.

Right alongside the window was a huge vat standing on four posts and open underneath.

For the boys to drop down and crawl underneath the vat was but the work of a moment, and there they crouched listening to the footsteps as they came stealing along the tannery yard.

"Martin Leake!" breathed Joe. But Oscar knew it before his companion spoke.

It was Martin, sure enough, and he was very much "under the influence," far more so than usual, and that was saying a good deal, for it was an open secret in Longford that Martin was scarcely ever sober nowadays.

If the case had been otherwise he might easily have seen Oscar and Joe, but as it was he came up to the window entirely unconscious of them and, balancing his arms upon the sill, looked in.

What he saw was precisely what the boys had seen and what puzzled them so.

Mr. Rainsford, with a spade in one hand and a dark-lantern in the other, was walking around on the tanbark chuckling to himself, and every now and then stopping at places where the bark had been turned up and disturbed.

"Twenty-four!" Martin heard him mutter. "Twenty-four, and not one of them right. I didn't need to be so scared after all. Ha! ha! ha!"

His laugh sounded like that of Diggory Doodles.

The boys heard it crouching there under the vat, and they heard Martin begin chuckling, too.

Martin continued to watch, and the boys could do nothing but wait.

Mr. Rainsford, however, went to work now, and stopped his chuckling.

Going over into one corner of the big inclosure he selected a certain spot and, brushing aside the tanbark, began to dig.

The sight seemed to sober Martin. He balanced himself straighter against the window and, drawing a revolver from his pocket, examined it carefully. Meanwhile, Mr. Rainsford dug on. His back was turned to the window and he did not see his nephew, when, placing one hand upon the sill, he suddenly vaulted into the tannery; nor did he hear him, for Martin's feet struck upon the soft bark and gave back no sound.

"What on earth is he about?" breathed Joe. "Can Martin mean to kill the old man?"

"He is bad enough for anything," replied Oscar, "but I hardly think he would do that. Now is our time to find out, though. Come on, Joe."

The boys crawled out from under the vat and took their places at the window.

Now they could see Mr. Rainsford digging, and they also saw Martin creeping along toward his uncle, under the shadow of the wall.

"That means murder," breathed Oscar.

"Sure," said Joe. "We can't let this go on. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know what you propose to do, but I know what I'm going to do," Oscar replied.

"What?"

"I'm going in there."

"Oh, don't! Don't think of it!"

"Oh, but I am, though. I've got my revolver, and I'll be hanged if I don't use it if it is necessary to bring those scoundrels to justice. You see that pile of old barrels there, close to where Rainsford is working? That's my stand, and if I go now, I can make it without being seen, but if you are in the least bit afraid to follow me, Joe Titus, you had better remain where you are."

"Not on your life," said Joe, bravely. "Where you go, I go, that's a sure thing."

"Ready, then," breathed Oscar, and he sprang through the window without making a sound, Joe following him just as noiselessly. Gliding along over the soft tan they succeeded in gaining the shelter of the pile of barrels, unseen and unheard, and they had hardly taken up their position there when the climax came.

Mr. Rainsford, suddenly throwing aside his spade, stooped down and pulled out of the hole a large bag, which he threw upon the tanbark.

"That's it. Everything is all right," he muttered. "I almost thought that Martin knew something, but——"

"But he does!" cried Martin, right behind him. "Up hands, Nunky! I'm out for business to-night! No two thousand plunks are going to satisfy me. I want half or nothing. Refuse, and blame me if I don't bore a hole through you right where you stand!"

With a face as white as chalk, Mr. Rainsford turned upon his nephew, but he did not throw up his hands.

"Martin, you are a bigger scoundrel than I believed you to be," he said, in a quavering voice. "Put up the revolver, boy. You have caught me foul. I am unarmed. I will not try to stand out against you. I am ready to do just whatever you say."

"That's all very pretty," growled Martin, "but I'll not put up the revolver till I get good and ready. Now, uncle, explain this. What's in the bag?"

"Don't you know?"

"I know nothing, except that I saw you lugging it here the night of the fire in Doodles' house. I would have followed you up then, but there were others with me and I couldn't. I did it all right later, though, and I dug around this tan till I was tired."

"Yes, and didn't find the bag," chuckled Mr. Rainsford, "and you don't know what's in it now. Ha! ha! ha! The case is not as bad as I thought it was. No, no!"

"Yes, it is, just as bad," replied Martin, savagely. "Uncle Ratcliffe, I'm in dead earnest. You have got to divide with me. Now, look here, I believe on my soul that it was you who robbed Diggory Doodles, tied him up and set his house afire. Is it so?"

"Nonsense! Nonsense!" blustered Rainsford. "Whatever put such an absurd idea as that into your head?"

"No nonsense about it. Open that bag."

"Well, well, Martin! Don't be so rough."

"Open that bag, I say! Open it or I shall shoot."

It was quite evident that Mr. Rainsford was not armed and that he was thoroughly afraid.

With trembling hand he untied the string around the bag and, turning it upside down, shook its contents out upon the tan.

Three japanned cash-boxes now lay revealed.

Darting forward, Martin snatched the lantern away from his uncle, and flashed the light down upon the boxes.

"Just as I thought!" he cried. "Each one marked 'Diggory Doodles!' Well, well! You are a thief, after all!"

"And what are you?" demanded Rainsford, fiercely. "Didn't you rob me?"

"And a firebug, too," chuckled Martin, toying with his revolver.

"And what are you?" repeated Rainsford. "Who threw the bomb into the engine-house to-night?"

"I did, by your direction."

"Well, did it do its work?"

"Blast it all, no! Oscar Everding was in there and I didn't know it. He picked up the bomb and threw it out into the lot."

"The deuce he did! That boy heads me off at every turn. Oh, if I could only see him dead before I leave Longford!"

"You are going, then, uncle?"

"Yes, to-night. All is ready. I shall drive to Deering and thence over to the lake, where a steamer is to stop and take me aboard."

"That means Canada."

"It does. You had better go with me, Martin. I'll divide with you."

"How much?"

"Forty thousand in Doodles' boxes, and some more of my own, which I have concealed from my creditors. After all, I had better have you with me than to go alone."

"That's business," said Martin. "Do you really mean it?"

"I do. It was foolishness for me to try to dodge you. We'll start a store over there, and in a year or two we ought to make a fortune, for we both are smart, and if we can't do it in one way we will in another, but before we leave this place there is something for us to do."

"More firebug business, uncle?"

"Right you are, boy. This old roost goes up in smoke to-night, and if it don't set the mill on fire and give me my revenge against John Maturin, I'm away off the mark—thunder and guns! What's that?"

There was a loud crash right behind them.

The big pile of empty barrels had suddenly toppled over, burying Oscar and Joe beneath them and pinning them under so effectually that they could neither move hand nor foot.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MAD DOINGS IN THE OLD TANNERY.

It was too much for Joe Titus. When the barrels came tumbling down upon him, Joe lost his head and gave a yell, which stirred up the echoes of the old tannery as they had not been awakened for many a long day.

"Spies! Spies!" cried Martin. "Uncle, get to work! We must get those fellows. I'll bet you what you like it's some of the boys of Old No. 9!"

How near right Martin was in his guess need not be told, and his uncle knew it in a moment, for both set right to work to drag the barrels away, and the first thing they came across was Oscar's leg.

"Here's one," exclaimed Rainsford. "Cover him, Martin. Shoot him dead if he makes a move."

"Better tie his legs together first," said Martin. "Have you got any cord?"

"Yes, lots of it. I thought I might need it for something or other, so I put it in my pocket before I left the house."

"Good enough! Be quick, now. I'm betting that it will turn out to be Oscar Everding. Just you wait and see."

Not a word from Oscar helped in the discovery, however. He realized that Fate had thrown him into the hands of his

enemies, and he resolved to keep a still tongue, and take everything just as it came.

As soon as his legs were tied, Martin removed more of the barrels and pulled him out.

Of course, Oscar was frightened. Who would not have been under the circumstances?

He showed his usual coolness, however, when he said:

"Hold on now, Martin Leake! Don't do anything you will be sorry for! Joe is in under those barrels! It was he that helloed, and I'm afraid he is dead."

"Oh, I won't do a thing to you, oh, no!" hissed Martin, flourishing the revolver in Oscar's face. "You blamed spy! You would come snooping around here, would you? Then take the consequences. I only wish I had another dynamite bomb to put under you and blow you as high as I would have blown Old No. 9, if you hadn't interfered."

Martin was boiling with rage, but his uncle seemed suddenly to have grown cool.

"Less talk! Less talk!" he said, hurriedly. "Don't make so much noise, Martin; we don't want to be overheard. This is the chance I've been longing for. The tannery goes up in smoke, just as I said it would, and these two young fools go with it. Ha! ha! Oscar Everding, now I shall have my revenge for all that you made me suffer to-day!"

While he was thus talking Mr. Rainsford was tying Oscar's hands behind him, Martin keeping him covered with the revolver meanwhile.

"You can kill me, Mr. Rainsford," said Oscar, proudly. "I'm not afraid of death, but you are, and, mark my words, the day will come when you will be paid back double for the crimes you commit this night."

"Bah! Bosh! Nonsense!" sneered Rainsford, giving Oscar a push and sending him over backward on the tan. "I'll take care of the future, all right; it's the present I am interested in. Now for the other one, Martin, and then to start these barrels burning! Ha! ha! ha! They'll make a most beautiful blaze!"

Oscar was now entirely helpless, and Joe was dragged out from under the barrels in the same condition, for the poor boy's arm proved to be broken, and he had fainted from the pain.

In spite of this, Rainsford tied him up securely and tumbled him down alongside of Oscar, where he revived a few moments later on.

There was no protest from the boys now.

Not only were they tied up, but gagged as well. This was more of Rainsford's work, and he did it so rapidly and effectively that he led one to think that he might have done the same thing before.

"Now, then, Oscar Everding, I've got you just where I want you at last!" hissed the firebug, when all was over. "I always disliked you, but now since you have taken to interfering with my affairs, I positively hate you. I only wish that I could stay here and see you burn."

To this fiendish speech Oscar could, of course, make no reply, but only stare and wonder what his fate was to be.

He had not long to wait to find out the next move of the two firebugs.

Rainsford and Martin began arranging the barrels in the best way to start the blaze.

There was a great pile of hay and rubbish over in one corner of the tannery, as well as many packing cases, for the building belonged to the woolen mill, and was used as a sort of storehouse for rubbish. It was really remarkable that a large concern should leave such a fire trap around.

It served the purpose of the firebugs all right, however, and Rainsford lost no time in putting his dastardly plan into execution; Martin helping him to fire the hay in several places.

In a moment it was blazing fiercely and bade fair to work its way down to the barrels, which surrounded Oscar and Joe.

This done, without saying a word to the prisoners, Rainsford seized two of the stolen cash-boxes and Martin the other, and both ran toward the window, eager to make their escape.

Martin was in advance, and he had scarcely reached the window when a shot suddenly rang out through the old tannery, and the former captain of No. 9, with a yell, measured his length upon the tan.

"Ha! ha! ha! Now I've got you! Now I've got you!" screamed the voice of Diggory Doodles, and Oscar, from where he lay, saw him spring in through the window, firing at Mr. Rainsford as he came.

"My money! My money! It was you who robbed me and burnt my house down and drove me mad! Give me my money, you thief! You wretch! Ha! ha! ha!"

Do you think for an instant that Mr. Rainsford stood still listening to this long tirade?

Nothing of the sort!

The old miser's shot flew wide of its mark, and in the heat of his mad passion he flung away the revolver and sprang at the firebug's throat.

A fierce struggle followed, Diggory Doodles shouting out his wild tirade as it went on.

Rainsford fought desperately, but he was no match for Doodles, who kept backing him over toward the fire, shouting:

"Burn you! I'll burn you! Firebug! Firebug! You tried to make one out of me! Now I'll burn you, as I ought to have done the night I helped you to set fire to your own store! Ha! ha! ha!"

Suddenly he ceased in his wild laugh, for Rainsford had vanished before his eyes—tumbling down into one of the big underground vats of the tannery, against the edge of which Doodles had pushed him without knowing that it was there.

For an instant Doodles paused and looked down into the vat.

"Aha! You are down there, are you?" he chuckled. "Well, stay there! My money! My money! I've got it at last!"

Oh, how hard Oscar tried to cry out then! He thought that perhaps Diggory Doodles, mad though he undoubtedly was, might take pity on them and set them free.

There was no such good luck, however. Doodles made a grab for his cash boxes, got all three, and with the burning hay and boxes crackling behind him, sprang through the window and disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

Now came the time when Oscar lost heart.

Helpless to make a move, and with Joe groaning alongside of him, the young captain of No. 9 bitterly regretted his folly in venturing into the old tannery in the way he did.

Still he made up his mind to die bravely, and was by no means wholly overcome with that sense of fear which the desperate nature of his situation might well have brought upon him; on the contrary, he was earnestly endeavoring to quiet his mind, when, all at once, loud shouts outside raised a thrill of hope in his heart.

"That's right! Hold him! Hold him! We have caught the firebug at last!" voices were shouting.

There were heavy blows being struck against the fence, which surrounded the old tannery on three sides, and the sound of hurried footsteps in the yard, and then, all in a moment, a lantern was flashed in at the window and Mr. Martin and several others sprang into the burning room.

"Here's one dead!" shouted the mill treasurer. "Heavens! it's Rainsford's nephew, Martin Leake!"

"Help! help! Save me!" cried a dismal voice, at the same time.

It was Rainsford himself calling from the bottom of the vat, where he stood in water up to his neck, and they were pulling him out, when, all at once, Mr. Maturin caught sight of the pleading face of Oscar Everding looking at him over near the burning pile.

* * * * *

Boom! Boom! Boom!

It was the big bell of the Methodist church once more ringing out the midnight alarm.

This meant a scramble out of bed in more than a dozen houses in Longford, and many who did not have to scramble turned over as they heard it and thought to themselves that the firebugs were at their work again.

"Where's Oscar? Where's Joe?"

These were the questions that the fire boys of Old No. 9 were asking themselves as they came bursting into the engine-house in so short a time after the alarm sounded that it was really wonderful how they managed to get there.

They were questions that no one could answer. Usually the first to respond to the alarm, Oscar Everding and Joe Titus were now among the missing, and this for reasons of which the reader is very well aware.

Their absence did not long delay the departure of the engine, however.

Sam Pendergast immediately took command, and just as soon as all was ready, Old No. 9 rumbled out of the fire-house into the street.

"Ahead with her, boys! Ahead with her!" shouted Sam.

"Hurry up that truck there!" he added, turning and looking back, for the hose-cart had not yet left the engine-house.

It followed in a moment, though, and as they passed the hook-and-ladder house farther up the street the doors flew open and Tom Brand came dashing out with his fire-hat on, all askew, closely followed by his men dragging the hook-and-ladder.

"Where's the fire?" yelled Tom.

"Woolen mill again, I guess, or down that way somewhere!" shouted Sam.

Then it was: "Where's Oscar? and where's Joe?" but to these questions Sam had no reply to make.

On they dashed, soon locating the fire at the old tannery, for as they came to Madison street, which ran along in front of the woolen mill, they saw the crazy old structure all ablaze.

Sam saw something else, too, which served to raise his spirits a bit.

It was nothing less than the captain of Old No. 9.

Bareheaded, and in a great state of excitement, Oscar came dashing up the street, shouting:

"Ahead with her, boys! Ahead with her! We have caught the firebugs! Let's save the mill if we can!"

* * * * *

As usual, Oscar was right on deck.

Even Mr. Maturin could not hold him back, and once he was free and heard the rattle of Old No. 9 he sprang away from his eager questioners, leaped out of the window, passed through the break in the fence and put himself at the head of his men.

Of course, he did not leave until he saw that Joe Titus was in safe hands, but once he got into his proper place Oscar did his usual efficient work, and worked Old No. 9, too, for all she was worth.

They could not save the tannery building—that was simply impossible, but the mill was thoroughly protected, and beyond a few broken panes of glass received no damage at all.

The wildest excitement prevailed all over Longford next day, when the story of that night's work came to be told.

Doodles, who had been captured at the gate of the tannery

with his cash-boxes in his hands, was now lodged in jail, and with him was Mr. Rainsford, while Martin Leake, hovering between life and death, lay in the Longford hospital with a bullet wound just above his heart, and last, and most unfortunate of all, Joe Titus was in bed at home, with a broken arm.

Of course, Oscar no longer held back the names of the firebugs now.

He had been true to his promise, and had caught them in the act, but the effort must surely have cost him his life if Mr. Maturin had not happened to be working late at the mill that night, going over some accounts.

He saw the smoke, just as he was leaving the office, and hastily summoning some of the mill hands, who lived in an adjoining house, he hurried to the rescue, with the fortunate results already told.

Weeks passed, and there were no more fires in Longford. A year passed and still it was just the same.

Great changes had taken place in the town by this time, however.

Mr. Rainsford was then hammering stone in the State prison yard, and Martin Leake was with him, for the court declared both equally guilty, and gave them fifteen years.

Diggory Doodles died in the lunatic asylum within six months, and after the death of this singular character, a will was found upon his person, leaving all his money to Oscar Everding in return for saving his life.

Although surely insane, Doodles' will was finally admitted to probate, for the reason that nobody turned up to dispute it, and before the end of the year Oscar came into considerable wealth, for beside the cash there was real estate; the young captain of Old No. 9 inherited about \$75,000 all told.

Before this, Mr. Maturin had given Oscar a fine position in the mill office, where he still remains.

Mr. Maturin did more than that. He bought the new fire engine which Martin Leake had negotiated for. Martin's company, thoroughly disgusted by the turn affairs had taken, voted to disband, and did so, without ever having squirted a hose, and the famous machine which they had bragged so about was rechristened "New No. 9."

Oscar is still captain, but he is going to resign just before his wedding, and he is to marry Cassie Sherman next month.

He will leave the affairs of the fire company in far more prosperous condition than they were at the time when it was almost an every-day occurrence in Longford to hear the midnight alarm.

Next week's issue will contain "MISSING SCHOOL; or, THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF BILLY BIRD." By Howard Austin.

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SPECIAL NOTICE.—All back numbers of this weekly except the following are in print: 1 to 25, 27, 29 to 36, 38 to 40, 42, 43, 45 to 51, 53 to 55, 57 to 60, 62, 64 to 69, 71 to 73, 75, 79, 81, 84 to 86, 88, 89, 91 to 94, 98 to 100, 102, 105, 107, 109 to 111, 116, 119, 122, 124 to 126, 132, 139, 140, 143, 163, 166, 171, 179 to 181, 186, 192, 212, 213, 215, 216, 233, 239, 247, 257, 265, 268, 272, 277, 294. If you cannot obtain the ones you want from any newsdealer, send the price in money or postage stamps by mail to FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 24 UNION SQUARE, New York, and you will receive the copies you order by return mail.

IN THE FOLDS OF THE SERPENT.

By John Sherman.

One day I went out in my boat duck-shooting.

I had got near enough for a shot and hit two of them, but they didn't fall into the water.

They fluttered along until they fell among the tall grass up in the cove.

The water was low, and the place was dry where they were.

I pulled up as far as I could, and then got out and waded up.

I knew very near where one of the ducks had fallen, and very soon had my eye on it.

As I ran up to take it I saw the head of a blacksnake pop up and catch it by the wing.

I ran up and snatched the bird away.

I had left my gun in the boat and had nothing to kill the snake with, but as I took the duck I put my foot upon the thief's neck.

The ground was moist and slimy, and, as the snake had his body braced among the roots of the stout reeds, he took his head out from under my foot as quick as a man could think.

I thought I would run back to my boat and get my gun and try to kill this fellow, and I had just turned for this purpose when I felt something strike my leg.

I looked down and found that the snake had taken a turn around my left leg with his tail, and was in the act of clearing his body from the grass.

I dropped the duck and gave a smart kick, but that didn't loosen him, so I tried to put my right foot upon him, but I might as well have tried to put my foot on a streak of lightning.

I had expected to see a snake four or five feet long, but instead of that he was nearly eight feet and a half!

Still I hadn't any great fear, for I supposed that when I came to put my hands on him I could easily take him off, for I was pretty strong in the arms.

In a few seconds he had his body all clear, and it was then that the first real thrill shot through me.

There he held himself by the simple turn around my leg, and with his back arched in and out he brought his head just on a level with mine.

I made a grab for him, but missed him, and then, as quick as you can snap your finger, he swept his head around under my arm—clear around my body—and then straightened up and looked me in the face again.

I gave another grab at him, and another, as quick as I could, but he dodged me in spite of all I could do.

I next felt the snake's body working its way up.

The turn of the tail was changed to my thigh, and the coil around me commenced to tighten.

I grasped him as near the head as possible by taking hold where he was around me—for he couldn't dodge that part—and tried to turn him off, but this only made it worse.

The fellow had now drawn himself up so high, and stretched himself so, that he whipped another turn about me.

His tail was now around my left thigh and the rest of him turned twice around my body.

All this had occupied about half a minute from the time he first got the turn around my leg.

The snake now had his head right in front of my face, and he tried to make his way to my mouth.

What his intention was I cannot surely tell, though I have always believed that he knew he could strangle me in that way.

He struck me one blow in the mouth that hurt me considerably, and after that I got him by the neck, and there I meant to hold him—at least, so that he should not strike me again.

But about this time another difficulty arose.

The moment I grasped the snake by the neck he commenced to tighten his folds about my body.

It wasn't over a few seconds before I discovered that he would soon squeeze the breath out of me in that way, and I determined to unwind him.

I held the snake with the left hand, and my idea was to pass his head around my back until I could reach it with my right, and so unwind him.

I could press the fellow's head down under my arm, but to get it around so as to reach it with my right hand I could not.

I tried—I put all my power into that one arm—but I could not do it.

I could get the head just about under my armpit, but here my strength was applied to a disadvantage, and I could do no more.

Until this moment I had not been really frightened.

I had believed I could unwind the serpent when I tried. I never dreamed what power he had.

My next thought was of my jack-knife, but the larger coil of the snake was directly over my pocket, and I could not get it.

I now for the first time called out for help.

I yelled with all my might, and yet I knew the trial was next to useless, for no one could easily gain the place where I was except with a boat.

Yet I called out, hoping against hope.

I grasped the snake by the body and pulley.

I tried to break its neck.

This plan presented itself with a gleam of promise, but it amounted to nothing.

I might as well have tried to break a rope by bending it forward or backward.

A full minute had now passed from the time when first I tried to pass the snake's head around my back.

His body had become so elongated by his gradual pressure around my body that he had room to carry his head around in a free and symmetrical curve.

He had slipped from my grasp, and when next I caught him I found that I was weaker than before.

I could not hold him!

The excitement had prevented me from noticing this until now.

For a few moments I was in a perfect frenzy.

I leaped up and down, cried out as loud as I could, and grasped the snake with all my might, but it availed me nothing.

He slipped his head from my weakened hand and made a blow at my face, striking me fairly upon the closed lips.

This made me mad, and I gave the infernal thing another grasp with both hands, trying once more to trist its neck.

The only result was I got another blow upon the mouth.

But tht moment of need was at hand.

I felt the coils growing tighter and tighter around my body, and my breath was growing weak.

A severe pain was beginning to result from the pressure, and I saw that the snake would soon have length enough for another turn.

He was drawn so tightly that the center of his body was no bigger than his head.

The black skin was drawn to a tension that seemed its utmost, and yet I could tell by the working of the large scales upon the belly that he was drawing himself tighter still.

"For mercy's sake!" I gasped, stricken with absolute terror. "What shall I do?"

What could I do?

The enemy for whom I had had at first so little thought was killing me—killing me slowly, openly, surely—and I had no help.

I, a stout, strong man, was being actually held at the deadly will of a blacksnake!

My breath was now short, faint and quick, and I knew that I was growing purple in the face.

My hands and arms were swollen, and my fingers were numb.

I had to let go of the snake's neck, and he now carried the upper part of his body in a graceful curve, his head vibrating from side to side with an undulating motion of extreme gracefulness.

At length I staggered.

I was losing my strength rapidly, and the pain of my body had become excruciating.

The snake's skin, where it was coiled about me, was so tight that it seemed almost transparent.

He had found me, or I had found him, in a state of hunger, his stomach free from food, and muscular force unimpaired.

A second time I staggered, and objects began to swim before me.

A dizzy sensation was in my head, a faintness at my heart, and a pain the most agonizing in my body.

The snake had three feet of body free.

He had drawn himself certainly three feet longer than before.

He darted his head under my right arm and brought it up over my shoulder, and, pressing his under jaw firmly down there, he gave a sudden wind that made me groan with new pain.

Each moment was an age of agony—each second a step nearer to death.

My knife!

Oh, if I could reach it!

Why not?

Why not tear it out?

My arms were free.

Why had I not thought of this before—when my hands had some strength in them?

Yet I would try it.

I collected all my remaining power for the effort and made the attempt.

My trousers were of blue cotton stuff, and very strong; I could not tear it.

I thought of the stitches.

They might not be so tenacious.

I grasped the cloth upon the inside of my thigh and gave my last atom of strength to the effort.

The stitches started—they gave way!

The result gave me hope, and hope gave me power.

Another pull—with both hands—and the pocket was laid bare.

With all the remaining force I could command—with hope of life, of home, of everything I loved on earth, in the effort—I caught the pocket from the inside and bore down upon it.

There was a cracking of the threads, a sound of tearing cloth, and my knife was in my hands.

I had yet sense enough to know that the smallest blade was the sharpest, and I opened it.

With one quick, nervous movement I pressed the keen edge upon the tense skin and drew it across.

With a dull, tearing snap the body parted, and the snake fell to the ground in two pieces.

I staggered to the boat; I reached it, and there sank down.

I knew nothing more until I heard a voice calling me by name.

I opened my eyes and looked up.

My father stood over me with terror depicted upon his countenance.

I told him my story as best I could.

He went up and got the duck I had taken from the snake—the other one he could not find—and also brought the two pieces I had made of my enemy.

He told me he had heard me cry out, and at once started off in the large boat after me, though it was a long time ere he saw my boat.

I had lain there over half an hour when he found me.

When we reached home the snake was measured and found to be eight feet and four inches in length.

It was a month before I fully recovered from the effects of that hugging, and to this day there is something in the very name of snake that sends a chill of horror to my heart.

In these days of steel and concrete construction work on skyscraper buildings, structural engineers are frequently asked what the fate of the building will be when the steel beams have rusted away. The best answer to that is found in the report of the surveyor of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, who recently caused an opening to be made in the concrete of the dome in order that the condition of the great chain which binds it at its base might be disclosed. This chain has been imbedded in concrete for more than 200 years and it was found to be as bright and perfect as when new. The reason why steel encased in concrete is prevented from rusting is that the oxide of iron chemically combines with the cement, forming a covering of ferrite of calcium, which is a good protective agent.

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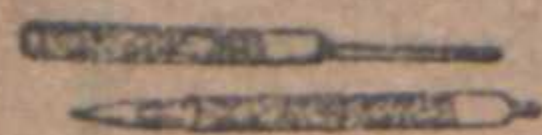
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It is made of a composition, exactly resembling a lighted cigar. The white ashes at the end and the imitation of tobacco-leaf being perfect. You can carelessly place it on top of the tablecloth or any other expensive piece of furniture, and await the result. After they see the joke everybody will have a good laugh. Price, 10c. each by mail, postpaid; 3 for 25c.

J. KENNEDY, 303 West 127th St., N. Y.

AUTOMATIC COPYING PENCIL.



The importance of carrying a good reliable pencil need not be dwelt upon here. It is an absolute necessity with us all. The holder of this pencil is beautifully nicked with grooved box-wood handle, giving a firm grip in writing; the pencil automatically supplies the lead as needed while a box of these long leads are given with each pencil. The writing of this pencil is indelible the same as ink, and thus can be used in writing letters, addressing envelopes, etc. Bills of account or invoices made out with this pencil can be copied the same as if copying ink was used. It is the handiest pencil on the market; you do not require a knife to keep it sharp; it is ever ready, ever safe, and just the thing to carry.

Price of pencil, with box of leads complete, only 10c.; 3 for 25c.; one dozen 90c. postpaid.

WOLFF NOVELTY CO., 29 W. 26th St., N. Y.

TRICK MATCHES.



Consist of a Swedish safety box, filled with matches, which will not light. Just the thing to cure the match borrowing habit. Price, 5c., postpaid.

WOLFF NOVELTY CO., 29 W. 26th St., N. Y.



MAGIC PIPE.

Made of a regular corn-cob pipe, with rubber figures inside; by blowing through the stem the figure will jump out. Made in following figures: rabbits, donkeys, cats, chickens, etc.

Price, 10c., postpaid.

WOLFF NOVELTY CO., 29 W. 26th St., N. Y.

POCKET SAVINGS BANK.



A perfect little bank, handsomely nickel plated. Holds just five dollars (50 dimes). It cannot be opened until the bank is full, when it can be readily emptied and re-loaded, ready to be again refilled. Every parent should see that their children have a small savings bank, as the early habit of saving their dimes is of the greatest importance. Habits formed in early life are seldom forgotten in later years. Price of this little bank, 10c.; 3 for 25c., mailed postpaid.

J. KENNEDY, 303 West 127th St., N. Y.



ELECTRIC PUSH BUTTON.

The base is made of maple, and the center piece of black walnut, the whole thing about 1 1/4 inches in diameter, with a metal hook on the back so that it may be slipped over edge of the vest pocket. Expose to view your New Electric Bell, when your friend will push the button expecting to hear it ring. As soon as he touches it, you will see some of the liveliest dancing you ever witnessed. The Electric Button is heavily charged and will give a smart shock when the button is pushed. Price 10c., by mail, postpaid.

WOLFF NOVELTY CO., 29 W. 26th St., N. Y.

TRICK CUP.



Made of natural white wood turned, with two compartments; a round, black ball fits on those compartments; the other is a stationary ball. By a little practice you make the black ball vanish; a great trick novelty and immense seller.

Price, 10c., postpaid.

WOLFF NOVELTY CO., 29 W. 26th St., N. Y.

MAGIC MIRROR.

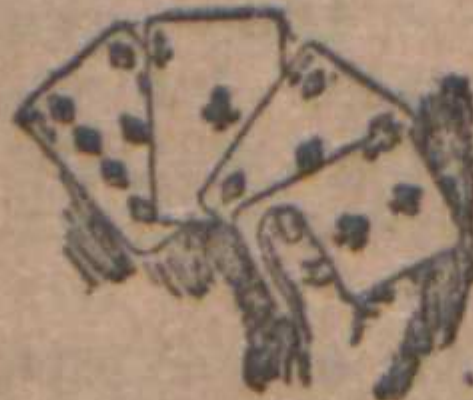


Fat and lean funny faces. By looking in these mirrors upright your features become narrow and elongated. Look into it sidewise and your phiz broadens out in the most comical manner. Size 3 1/2 x 2 1/4 inches, in a handsome imitation morocco case.

Price, 10c. each, postpaid.

H. F. LANG, 215 Walworth St., B'klyn., N. Y.

THE CANADIAN WONDER CARD TRICK.



Astonishing, wonderful, and perplexing! Have you seen them? Any child can work them, and yet, what they do is so amusing that the sharpest people on earth are fooled. We cannot tell you what they do, or others would get next and spoil the fun. Just get a set and read the directions. The results will startle your friends and utterly mystify them. A genuine good thing if you wish to have no end of amusement.

Price by mail, 10c.

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PICTURE POSTALS.



They consist of Jungle sets, Map and Seal of States, Good Luck cards, Comics, with witty sayings and funny pictures, cards showing celebrated person's buildings, etc. In fact, there is such a great variety that it is not possible to describe them here. They are beautifully embossed in exquisite colors, some with glazed surfaces, and others in matt. Absolutely the handsomest cards issued.

Price 15c. for 25 cards by mail.

WOLFF NOVELTY CO., 29 W. 26th St., N. Y.

THE INK BLOT JOKER.



Fool Your Friends—The greatest novelty of the age! Have a joke which makes everybody laugh. More fun than any other novelty that

has been shown in years. Place it on a desk, tablecloth, or any piece of furniture, as shown in the above cut, near some valuable papers, or on fine wearing apparel. Watch the result! Oh, Gee! Price, 15c. each, postpaid.

J. KENNEDY, 303 West 127th St., N. Y.



STAR AND CRESCENT PUZZLE.

The puzzle is to separate the one star from the linked star and crescent without using force. Price by mail, postpaid 10c.; 3 for 25c.

WOLFF NOVELTY CO.,
29 W. 26th St., N. Y.

THE AUTOPHONE.



A small musical instrument that produces very sweet musical notes by placing it between the lips with the tongue over the edge, and blowing gently into the instrument. The notes produced are not unlike those of the flute and flute. We send full printed instructions whereby anyone can play anything they can hum, whistle or sing, with very little practice. Price, 10c.; 3 for 25c., mailed, postpaid.

J. KENNEDY, 303 West 127th St., N. Y.

SNAKE IN THE CAMERA.



To all appearances this little startler is a nice looking camera. The proper way to use it is to tell your friends you are going to take their pictures. Of course they are tickled, for nearly everybody wants to pose for a photograph. You arrange them in a group, fuss around a little bit, aim your camera at them, and request the ladies to look pleasant. As soon as they are smiling and trying to appear beautiful, press the spring in your camera. Imagine the yell when a huge snake jumps out into the crowd. Guaranteed to take the swelling out of any one's head at the first shot.

Price 35 cents, by mail, postpaid.

H. F. LANG, 215 Walworth St., B'klyn., N. Y.

THE MAGIC DAGGER.



A wonderful illusion. To all appearances it is an ordinary dagger which you can flourish around in your hand and suddenly state that you think you have lived long enough and had better commit suicide, at the same time plunging the dagger up to the hilt into your breast or side, or you can pretend to stab a friend or acquaintance. Of course your friend or yourself are not injured in the least, but the deception is perfect and will startle all who see it.

Price, 10c., or 3 for 25c. by mail, postpaid.

J. KENNEDY, 303 West 127th St., N. Y.

ITALIAN TRANSFER.



With this remarkable invention any one can transfer pictures or engravings from newspapers or books, and make perfect copies of butterfly and moth wings for scrap books. It is the dry transfer process, cleanly, handy and reliable, and the results secured will astonish you. Transfer is a gelatinous substance put up in cakes, one of which is enclosed with a wooden rubber and full directions for producing pictures, it requiring but a few moments to make the transfer. Any picture in the newspapers can be speedily reproduced in your album, or elsewhere, a perfect copy being made, and several copies can be made from the same picture. Butterfly and moth wings can also be pictured, all the beautiful colors and markings on the wings being transferred, and thus an interesting and instructive collection of insect forms can be made and permanently preserved in a scrap book. Both young and old will take delight in using Transfer, and the price is so low that all can afford to have this new process at command. Price only 10c., 3 for 25c.; one dozen, 75c., by mail postpaid.

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PLUCK AND LUCK

NEW YORK, JULY 3, 1912.

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BRIEF, BUT POINTED.

Dr. Walter O. Snelling, consulting chemist of the Bureau of Mines and of the Panama Canal Commission, now doing laboratory work in Washington, has developed a liquid gas of which a little steel bottle will carry enough to light a house for a month. Snelling puts 2,000 feet of gas into a steel container four feet high and six inches in diameter.

Gravely, and not apparently with humorous intent, the information is sent broadcast from Great Barrington, Mass., to the effect that a citizen of that town has purchased a twelve-acre farm admirably adapted to the breeding of rattlesnakes, and he is proposing to stock this ranch with rattlesnakes and to engage in the breeding of these venomous reptiles with the purpose and expectation of making money.

While digging the foundations for a hospital to be built at Neuchatel, Switzerland, the workmen lately discovered a beautiful vault built in bronze, which Swiss scientists state was built 600 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. In the tomb was the skeleton of a young woman, whose bones were still in a natural position. On the wrists were six bracelets, four in bronze and two in lignite, and near the skeleton was a little bronze bell.

According to *Engineering* the busiest railway station in the world is that of the Gare St. Lazare, Paris, for the total number of passengers arriving or departing is officially set down at nearly 45,000,000 annually. Our contemporary considers that there is nothing approaching this anywhere else, and we are inclined to agree with him. It is estimated that 35,000,000 would be the outside number dealt with in a year at the three great London termini—Waterloo, Liverpool Street and Euston.

In the sixteenth century there was a curious law in England, whereby street hawkers were forbidden to sell plums and apples. Can you imagine why such an absurd law was enacted? Because the sapient lawmakers believed that servants and apprentices were unable to resist the sight of these rich fruits, and were consequently tempted to steal their employers' money in order to enjoy the costly delicacies.

The ropes used by Alpine climbers is of special manufacture, combining as far as possible the differing qualities of strength, flexibility and lightness. Three qualities are in general use, being made from Sisal, Italian and Manila hems, respectively, and occasionally, when cost is not a consideration, of silk. The latter, though very light and strong, is not so durable as the others. That which finds most favor among British mountaineers is known as Buckingham's Alpine rope; it is made of the best Manila hemp. In the year 1864, Mr. Leish recalls, a committee of the Alpine Club made tests upon a number of ropes suitable for mountaineering. Of the two that were approved one was made of Italian hemp and the other of Manila. They both had a breaking strain of two tons and sustained the weight of a twelve stone man after falling from a height of ten feet. Non-mountaineers have sometimes considered this insufficient, but it is highly problematical whether the human anatomy could survive the sudden compression of a thin rope arising from any greater fall.

OUR COMIC COLUMN.

Pa—Embrace me, Thora, Reginald has asked your hand in marriage. Thora—But I don't want to leave mother, pa. Pa—Oh! Never mind that. Take her along with you.

Mrs. Murphy—So your son Dennis fell from his airyo-plane? Sure, Oi thought he was learnin' to fly in a correspondence school. Mrs. Casey—He was, but he shtopped short in the middle of a lesson.

In the coming restaurant: "Here, waiter, take this away. What do you mean by bringing me soup with a bit of paper floating around in it?" "I can't serve you soup without that, sir. That's the union label."

"Thief! Robber! Stop him!" shouted the grandstand fan who had turned his head just in time to see a pick-pocket making away with his purse. But the big policeman thought he was reviling the umpire, and dragged him, despite his sputtering protests, outside the grounds.

These are some of the pupils' answers to examination problems in Butte, Mont.: The countries benefited by the overflow of the Nile are Europe, Asia, Australia and America, because they are not there to be drowned. The source of the Nile River is its main strength. Example—A boy paid \$8.25 for a wagon and sold it for \$7.75. Did he gain or lose, and how much? Answer—He gained on the cents and lost on the dollars.

They were in Italy together. "If you would let me curse them black and blue," said the groom, "we wouldn't have to wait so long for the trunks." But, dearest, please don't. It would distress me so," murmured the bride. The groom went off, but quickly returned with the porters before him trundling the trunks at a double quick. "Oh, dearest, how did you do it? You didn't—" "Not at all. I thought of something that did quite as well. I said 'S-s-s-susquehanna, R-r-r-rappahannock!'"

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